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I, Coronavirus. Mother. Monster. Activist.

BAYO AKOMOLAFE

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and north-western North Carolina with tea-coloured water and a shocking history. Called the Great Dismal Swamp, this sprawling swamp was once home to marooned former slaves escaping their masters. Archaeological evidence suggests the maroons built a society here in defiance of the capitalist traditions of the Antebellum South. What's interesting is how the slaves found their way there – without maps, without directions.

[36] https://blog.oup.com/2014/06/alaskan-inuit-music-traditions/

[37] I have often wondered if the women and men bound to seafaring transatlantic slave ships had their own qarrtsiluni, shackled to the darkness of the hull as they were.

[38] https://aeon.co/essays/there-be-monsters-from-cabinets-of-curiosity-to-demons-within

[39] Other examples from pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican peoples suggest that ritual cave use, in which participants sought to commune with the more-than-human, also involved the monster – with entrances to the caves shaped in the form of the two open maws of an earth monster.

[40] Donna Haraway's husband, Rusten Hogness, suggested the name 'humusities' instead of 'humanities'. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/

[41] https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/when-india-lift-coronavirus-lockdown-bcg-report-restriction-extended-sept/story/400111.html

[42] By 'our', I mean my many families – not just my family of procreation but my *family of co-creation*, those I choose to name my siblings in the work I call vital.

[43] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007). Duke University Press.

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the Village of Chamounix," GLQ 1 (1994): 237–54

[27] Karen Barad, "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," GLQ 21 (2015): 387-422

[28] An implication of this analysis is that the 'human' already implies the nonhuman or the posthuman. Being human is not an implicit characteristic or inalienable attribute or right without backgrounding or muting the contributions of the world around us.

[29] Those of us gestating in modern experiments we call 'cities', subjects of its hopes and imaginations and entitlements.

[30] The Anthropocene is in one sense a rallying cry to humans to reseal the gaps, to close up the wounds, to restore the primacy of meaning, and extend our colonial might to the 'future'. But blind to its own legacies of extraction, dispossession, extermination, displacement, backgrounding and abstraction, it presumes the universality of the 'human'.

[31] In a bid to quickly rid themselves of the virus and get back to the economy, some governments are mulling the idea of issuing "Coronavirus Immunity Certificates" or "Immunity Passports". The plan is to issue these "Immunity Passports" to those who have already contracted and recovered from the coronavirus so they can return to work in the middle of the lockdown imposed in many nations. Beyond concerns about risky behaviour and fraud (people deliberately risking infection in order to return to normalcy), or about the accuracy of these tests, a less-considered question is: if immunity becomes currency, a form of access, is it too far-fetched to imagine class warfare in which the elite deploy sicknesses to curb the insurgency and stifle the protests of lower and middle class groups? Doesn't it bother us that such a certificate will contain definitions and measurements of immunity that cater to privileged groups? Might this reinforce an inflected form of 'whiteness', a new kind of 19th-century-Ellis-Island-arrival, a sorting of bodies, a ranking of who gets to participate and who doesn't?

[32] https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-04-03/coronavirus-spells-the-end-of-the-neoliberal-era-whats-next/

[33] Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013; p.8), Minor Compositions.

[34] Donna Haraway

[35] There is a swamp located between south-eastern Virginia

exceeds its specifications as a 'virus': it is a postactivist opening, a crack in the form of things, a topographical involution.

[14] https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/31/asia/wuhan-coronavirus-racism-fear-intl-hnk/index.html

[15] An intra-action is different from an interaction. In the case of the latter, two individual entities interact but maintain their independence. An intra-action means there are no individuals as such, and that what we call individuals materialize within relational formulations, in co-constitutive ways. What a thing is cannot be traced to the thing, but to the assemblage it is a 'part' of.

[16] From an assemblage perspective, there aren't even stable umbrella categories like 'nature' and 'world' into which we might incorporate smaller items and things.

[17] Hence the Yoruba proverb: Ilé ọba tójó ẹwà ló bùsi. Roughly translates as: "the king's palace got burnt and became beautiful".

[18] Maulik R. Patel, Michael Emerman, and Harmit S. Malik. "Paleovirology – Ghosts and gifts of viruses past." 1 October 2012. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3190193/

[19] Carl Zimmer. *A Planet of Viruses* (pgs. 91). The University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 2011.

[20] Astrid Schrader, *Microbial suicide: Towards a less anthropocentric ontology of life and death* (2017). Body and Society.

[21] https://deepcarbon.net/life-deep-earth-totals-15-23-billion-tonnes-carbon

[22] Hong Chen, Lanlan Cai, Nianzhi Jiao, Rui Zhang. "Viruses in the deep biosphere: A review." 27 Aug 2018. Chinese Science Bulletin. http://engine.scichina.com/publisher/scp/journal/CSB/63/36/10.1360/N972018-00612?slug=fulltext

[23] It is interesting that the etymological root of the 'virus' simultaneously refers to the 'semen of a man' and 'poison'.

[24] A flat ecology, such as the one proposed by this piece, is a place where differences meet each other.

[25] Mirko Nikolic, *All that is air melts into city: minoritarian apparatuses for a more-than-human world* (p.485), in Research Methods in Environmental Law, Brooks, V. and Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, Andreas (ed.) 2017.

[26] Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above

THIS ESSAY IS AN EXPERIMENT IN SPECULATIVE FABULATION, in reframes and the telling of wild facts.[1] Think of that as journalism into the feral conditions and magnificent terrains that make facts, as we have come to understand them, possible. Like most offerings in this genre of posthumanist literature,[2] the aim is to shock you, the reader-author, into noticing the world differently. Into touching the scandalous fugitivity and plausibility of the impossible. Noticing the world differently can have material consequences that could be the difference between taking care and perpetuating paradigms of oppression and needless suffering.

Speaking of suffering, I am writing this essay with body aches, but none so persistent as the lingering and animated sense that a serious moment is upon us, catalysed by the remarkable agency of a miniscule, microscopic, imperceptible, tinier-than-a-critter, and strange guest named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome–Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

Ever since this novel coronavirus crept up in late 2019, a telluric war and public relations machine has revved up in response, promising—in the all-too-familiar self-promoting language of conquest and villainy—the eventual annihilation (or, more realistically, the containment and management) of the virus and its effects. We've seen this before, many times. In sci-fi depictions of encroaching extra-terrestrials, the military's big guns are usually the first response. We trot out the generals and their soldiers and stand gloomily beholding the *invader* through angry pixels and crosshairs,

thumbs hovering nervously over gleaming red buttons. Modernity, whose abiding logic is stability and control, has a low tolerance for the strange, so it resorts to war. Over *and over again*.

One of the central questions I ask with this essay is: *If this is indeed a war, do we really want to win it?* What if *winning* is the worst possible outcome we could imagine? Do we want to come out on top, stamp out this *viral enemy*, and restore agency to the cold ossified tentacles of the familiar? *Are we sure this disruption is not what we want, what we've cried for in unvoiced ways?* Should we not treat this opening as our grand marronage, our fugitive departure from exhausted cottonfields?

Nothing about this moment is *romantic*. And we should be careful about smoothening the hard and recalcitrant edges of this phenomenon to fit our ready-made narratives about the so-called *deeper meanings* of the pandemic. I speak of popularized stories about, say, the Earth's comeuppance, about the virus being on 'our' side against the one-percenters and the boomer generation, about the fall of capitalism or Gaia's revenge, about the way love always prevails. This isn't the rise of Nature to correct everything that has been wrong; this isn't Eywa battling it out with the extractivist corporations. Not exclusively. This virus is not a resource for the factories that produce human intelligibility; it need not surrender to our appeals for everything to make sense. As such, I am very reluctant to offer an overview about what is happening, or to perpetuate those convenient stories because they tend to re-centralize humans as heroes-in-wait (*if only we could get our act together, you know*).

More importantly, there is no *one world* or stable category (like Gaia, or 'nature', or even 'humans') by which any of these narratives, useful they may be, might be treated as gospel truth. Every virus in its unfolding mattering and mutability is the creation of new worlds; every jot and tittle come with their own universes. Viruses in themselves resist coherence and categorization; there isn't a stable group we can refer to (as a brief passage later in this text on the shocking mimivirus will suggest). How do you identify something that reworks identity, that destabilizes bodies and invites diffraction? How do you name viruses without naming the cuts, the measurements, the philosophies, the agendas and the technoscientific practices that are complicit in the naming?

epidemic has a natural origin." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 17 March 2020. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/03/200317175442.htm

[8] https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/01/31/800975655/why-theyre-called-wet-markets-and-what-health-risks-they-might-pose

[9] https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/19/health/coronavirus-human-actions-intl/index.html

[10] https://qz.com/india/1827993/coronavirus-lockdown-means-better-air-quality-for-delhi-mumbai/

[11] China's surveillance apparatus may have contributed to its delayed response to the initial alarm about the outbreak. How? Surveillance is a phenomenon that cuts both ways, marking both the surveilled and the observers. Not only does it produce disciplinary regimes of control, it weakens the state by reinforcing a posture and myth of control, blinding it to its susceptibilities and rendering it rigid in the face of complex emergencies. With most command-and-control dynamics, there is "a lack of transparency, trust and the free flow of information", leaving the state the sole burden to shoulder the responsibility of education in the midst of a crisis. *Power weakens*. https://www.twincities.com/2020/02/13/other-voices-in-china-the-coronavirus-outbreak-has-exposed-the-authoritarian-regimes-greatest-weakness/

[12] How is it that the world's most developed countries, champions in advancement, the greatest nation in the world, the bastion of imperial majesty, the empire of neoliberalism – how is it that they have been exposed as naked? The very materials with which western superiority was composed, its impregnability and exclusivity are the same materials that have rendered it fatally vulnerable. COVID mocked the emperor's clothes. Development is undone. In the face of a virus, the whole edifice of escape comes crashing down.

[13] Perhaps this is the reason why Fred Moten notes that "one does not speak truth to power", and the reason why I, following Moten's lead, add: "one disturbs power's claims to exclusivity." The identity of this "one" is not necessarily human; the identity is posthumanist, emerging, non/human, more-than-human, fluid and unspeakable in any final sense. In this sense, the SARS-CoV-2 virus

Notes & References

[1] A formulation attributed to feminist scholar and biologist, Donna Haraway, who speaks of the fable as a form, a place where *wild facts* live – facts that won't stay still and won't be domesticated into the literary tameness of 'narrative' or the ontological nobility of 'truth'. Speculative fabulation (SF) is not about telling lies or telling the truth; it will not be incarcerated in this flawed binary. It assembles strange congregations, wild beings, myths, reframed contexts, impossible worlds, riddles and concepts. These *fabulous* matters are no less material, no less consequential to the worlding of the world than the things we count as real. What's real is an open question, an open wound.

[2] I invite readers to wrestle with the sci-fi, speculative fabulation offerings of Octavia Butler, Ursula le Guin, Nnedi Okorafor among many other authors of esteem.

[3] I call this thesis, *postactivism*. And it will take a longer treatment to explore what it means. However, the ideas the concept borrows from are not new, and I'm indebted to indigenous communities like the Yoruba in West Nigeria, conversations I have had with friends and colleagues (especially in The Emergence Network), readings and wrestling with elders like Karen Barad and Donna Haraway and Wole Soyinka, and teachers I continue to respect like my wife, Ijeoma Clement-Akomolafe, our daughter and son, Alethea Aanya and Kyah Jayden Abayomi.

[4] And die we must. If our cells are functioning properly, they are constantly dying. We lose millions of cells every day, every second. A cancerous cell is, by definition, a cell that has refused to die.

[5] Not that there's any other kind of seeing! Visuality is always partial, value-laden, and provisional. We never just see things, we *make* things visible in fragile practices that also come with shadows. Here is the link to an informative video about microscopy and the performative imaging of microbes: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBmzwM76V0o

[6] https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/coronavirus-pangolins-may-have-spread-the-disease-to-humans#How-could-pangolins-have-spread-the-virus?

[7] Scripps Research Institute. "COVID-19 coronavirus

The staggering complexity of what is happening rattles our habitual modes of sense-making, our need to trace out logical origin stories and plots and characters. Such are the makings of *a world* (by way of speaking, of course) that exceeds humans and our claims to exceptionality. When we have fallen to our lowest point, we are probably closer than ever to the middle of *a cosmos of other things* where the answers to our questions, urgent though they may seem, are no longer helpful in resolving those questions—for there are perhaps only two ways of responding to a question: one, with an answer that offers closure within the same economy of meaning; and, two, with bewilderment, which releases the question from its self-incarceration within its own world.

Having said that, tens of thousands of people are now dead, a million or more sickened by this turn of events. And, given the shocking pathogenicity of the virus (compared to other coronaviruses like SARS in 2003 and MERS in 2012), its epidemiological reproduction number of 2-3 (that is, R0=2-3, a way that epidemiologists calculate how infectious diseases transfer from person to person), and the time it takes to develop vaccines, the novel coronavirus is going to be with us for an uncomfortably long time. The old normal is dead.

This infection is very likely to wash over most of us, touching those we love, hurting our incomes, driving us to the precipices of madness. I am scared, I tell you. I would do anything to protect my wife and our children. Author Francis Weller reminds us that everything we love *we will lose*, a sobering drug of words that snaps us into really considering the fragility of being alive and the loss that always inheres complexity and change.

For many of us, this is not abstract: my home now has an ugly 14-day quarantine label stamped upon it by Indian officials who investigated my wife's travel history and determined that her recent trip to Africa may have exposed her to the virus. The order, in addition to the larger scale lockdown directive imposed on the entire nation, prevents contact with anyone for the period determined. They also ink-stamped the underside of her wrist with numbers and a tag, marking her bare skin with the prerogatives of the nation-state, oblivious to the haunting history of their gestapo-like antics. For us, the call to isolate ourselves, to "flatten the curve", to reduce

the stresses on the exhausted systems that those befuddlingly bovine behemoths we boorishly call "nation-states" are putting together, could be the difference between living and dying.

And yet I am mostly concerned that the apparatus of epidemiological authorities, nation-states and its citizens, and the modern hero narratives that inspire the pathologization of the radical 'stranger', has locked us into predictable modes of responsivity—and is cutting out other senses of the possible. Why is this important? It is important because the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis.

You see, our responses and the troubles they are directed towards are co-constitutive aspects of each other. They are species of the same assembly of processes, feeding each other in mutually stabilizing loops (which is the reason I sometimes say 'hope' can have insidious effects, getting in the way of transformation). We are scared that the world we know, the world that allowed us to extend our power into the 'future', to colonize the *next*, to marvel at the hieroglyphics of our brilliance inscribed on titanic walls by which we have held at bay the uncertain, the wild dragons, the impossible antics of (what we have, with impunity, called) "nature", is ending. And so, as creatures of this besieged valley, we will do all in our power to stop this invasion, this pandemic. And that motivation reasserts itself as a will to control, as a declaration of independence, as mutiny against the processes that are the condition of our becoming, as a clearing of wild places to make space for anthropocentric dreams of dominance, and as the insurgency of the invisible. **As such, something stranger than a pandemic is afoot, something queerer than the world being in some epic argument against viruses, something not easily named or processed or met by performances of** *social distancing*. **Something that wants more than a resolution.**

This essay is instigated by an interesting thesis:[3] that what happens, say, in the Dragons' Den (the long-running British television programme based on entrepreneurship and the first principles of business) *exceeds entrepreneurship*; that in the fine molecular spillages that occur in a field of entangled bodies, for example, a classroom with students and a teacher, important matters are taking place that *exceed* the rationalized roles assumed by the players in that field (put simply, a classroom is more than just a place

I await your orders.

get you back in order. We thank you for your compliance. It is all for a good cause.

I turned to leave. A few inches from the door, a voice I couldn't recognize interrupted my departure.

S1: How do you know it is for a good cause?

I can only describe this voice as an otherworldly voice. *Subject 1* sounded like he spoke with multiple echoes stringed to his voice. He wasn't screaming, and I could detect no physical or architectural anomalies to account for that strange effect. Dr. Jonathan was obviously shaken by the experience of hearing his voice that he bolted for the door.

I stood my ground.

Self: Dr. Braithwaite? Is this you?

S1: Yes...it is us.

I left soon after, ordering the room sealed and other patients in the hospital immediately evacuated to a nearby facility. The final comments from *Subject 1* ("yes...it is us") revealed the peculiar speech pattern that we had associated with the ITE: the pluralized subject.

I will offer no confident theories about what is happening, but it is my opinion—bizarre as it seems—that the ITE has somehow merged with Dr. Braithwaite, creating a new entity, *Subject 1*. I may be wrong, but for now we have barricaded the subject's room in the hospital. I am not sure how long we can contain him in the open, so close to the city. As we are following Level 2 Protocols and keeping this event away from the public, I would not recommend we attempt to move him back to the cantonment until we understand what we are dealing with. I have also ordered the quarantining of all the doctors and medical personnel that may have met him.

A course of action is needed that can ascertain *Subject 1*'s status and his psychological profile. I am consulting with my team to decide on any other kind of expertise that may help us make sense of this. We will also need reinforcements to deal with the growing logistics of our operations here.

In the absence of any reinforcements or support, I will have no other choice but to terminate *Subject 1* to preclude the possibility of further exposure.

where teaching happens); and, that—to put it simply—*viruses do not cause diseases.* That way of reading the world, as a bundle of nailed-down causal packages, as a container of identified or potentially identifiable 'things' with pre-relational properties, as a hierarchy of causes and their effects, loses sight of how chimeric, contingent, alive and open-ended the materializing of matter is. Another way of saying this is that our responses, our imaginations, our hopes, our visions of what may come next, our understanding of what this is, are largely produced by the same rationalized, puritan world that is the condition of the 'virus'. That is awkward—but one does not throw the sanitized response at the awkward. One does not protest *Sango the tornado* as he whirls in zealous anger. One prostrates.

This long essay-story-meditation-prayer-invitation is a non-proselytizing attempt to tell a different story—this time from the perspective of the *virus*; yes, this essay involves a story that experiments with *giving agency* to the virus, with approaching 'it' as a *being* instead of an annoying glitch in the stock market or a tiny isolatable object that lives outside of the kinds of measurements we (our epidemiological-governmental-scientific-societal-political-ecological systems) are making.

This essay seeks to postpone the immediacy of the *host*, and to pose new questions—the answers to which I do not pretend to have. Given that we humans inhabit a pluriverse that exceeds us, the manifold stirrings of worlds we cannot possibly be the centre of, it stands to reason that there are other matters at stake other than prolonging human survival or *returning things to normal.*

What, you say, *could possibly be more pressing than our survival?* I should consider myself successful and ever more appreciative of the gifts of insights I have enjoyed if you, the reader, were to *complete* this reading (or at least leave it partly and respectably eaten) and walk away from it so thoroughly unsettled that you find yourself faintly capable of perceiving what an answer to that question might feel like.

May our normal never be the same again.

May our roads be rough, and the disturbance our sanctuaries.

Chennai, India | Day 27 ADc

The Inquisition

We watch him come close to us with at least sixteen of his lidless eyes dilated; the leathery pores along his neck quivering as they secrete some sticky goo; the phosphorescent splotches and tumours lining his tentacles-for-arms glowing an angrier yellow; and, his amphibian skin radiating out new hairlike antennae that snake their way through the walls and out the room. He looks beautiful tonight. *Well, most humans do.*

We call him Braveheart. And he is, is he not? He is our brother. We've been waiting for him.

He wipes his large brow, embroidered with beads of sweat and lines of wrinkle, as he clumsily pulls up the chair. Slimy penile protrusions subsequently extend from his sides and snake around in the air for a bit, sniff the chair, and then dock into bulging gates that litter the chair's surfaces. Six feet away from where we sit. His gloved hands are trembling ever so slightly. Always keep the distance, he thinks.

His lungs. We can feel her expand and flare up like an angered goddess disrobed, a naked Artemis in full view. Like a peacock in full swagger. The music of his breathing is overwhelming: we feel everything, we do. The fierce molecular inrush of air, a consortium of thoracic muscles in generous receipt, and the unspeakable humming of a billion red blood cells electrified in their orbit, singing songs of gratitude for the visitors that arrived through many lives and many deaths, through many dispersals. If only he could hear what we hear. The animal majesty of breathing. If only these ones standing with swaggering lungs behind thick glass could hear like we do.

He is shuffling through his notes scribbled on a yellow jotter pad. His yellow slit eyes, the only part of his face visible behind the mask he wears, is confused, flustered. He will try to make a great show of professional composure, so he doesn't disappoint the other eyes looking behind the safety of the glass. He manages to still himself, raises his head and forcefully exhales three times in quick succession—and there's the music again.

Every single breathing body has a distinct musical culture to it, a soft composition with a ceaseless encore. No performance is ever the same. To breathe is to sing a note of indebtedness in an impossibly complex orchestration that congregates everything from the baroque glass bodies

peculiarity of his situation earned him the moniker, '*Subject 1*'. We have contacted the WHO about our observations and the results of ongoing tests.

This morning, after three days since *Subject 1* was admitted, I received a call at 0801 hours from the Hospital. It was Colonel Muhammadu Danladi. He handed the phone to Doctor Jonathan Fawehinmi, the Head of the ICU, who informed me that *Subject 1* had fully recovered. They could neither trace the ITE nor detect an infection.

I arrived at the wards an hour later and was shown into the room.

There, sitting upright in his bed, was *Subject 1*. He seemed well and calm.

The following is my recollection of our very brief exchange—if it indeed can be called an exchange (I have italicized this dialogic aspect of my report for your convenience):

Self: Hello, Dr. Braithwaite. You had us very worried. How do you feel this morning?

S1: (Silence).

Self: Do you have any memory of what happened to you?

S1: (Silence).

Self: Have you had something to eat? Drink?

S1: (Silence).

Self: Well, I hope you get better soon, and can speak with us, eh? I am sure we will gain a lot of experience and knowledge from your debrief session – especially concerning our paramount worry right now: the sudden disappearance of the ITE.

S1: (Silence).

At this point, I gestured towards Dr. Jonathan, who was in the room with me, asking him to confer with me. I asked him why *Subject 1* was not communicating with me. The doctor told me there was no reason why, no underlying condition, no brain injury or any other condition that might explain why he was non-communicative. He recommended a psychiatric assessment as soon as possible.

I turned my attention towards *Subject 1*.

Self: Do you understand anything I am saying to you, Dr. Braithwaite?

S1: (Silence).

Self: Well, I want you to know that we in the military never leave a man in the battlefield. We'll make sure we do all we can to

along pre-established protocols in line with the President's mandate to discover intelligence on the pandemic insurgency. It was his third day with the ITE. There were no recorded gains on the first two days. On this day, however, after an uncharacteristic emotional outburst from *Subject 1*, the ITE responded to the interview, communicating for the first time. The ITE communicated in English.

At this moment, I was behind the one-way mirror viewing the interrogation. When the ITE began to communicate, I immediately placed a call to Major General Julius Ikwele to update him about the event. I was barely two minutes into the call when I was interrupted by commotion coming from the room. The cantonment personnel in the viewing room with me started to scream and point into the interrogation room. I caught a glimpse of the ITE levitate into the air, having released itself from its handcuffs, as *Subject 1* fell backwards in fright. My men, some of whom had no masks or protective gear, ran into the room, but for some reason could not gain immediate entry. I watched as the ITE approached *Subject 1*, now immobilized, and then touched some part of his face. Torn between the goings-on in the room and my men's effort to gain access, I shifted my attention for a moment. I looked back to find the ITE had disappeared, seemingly sucked into the body of *Subject 1* or dematerializing in some other way.

After we gained access, adequately clad in medical protective gear, we found *Subject 1* unconscious in the room. We immediately transferred him to the ICU of the Lagos State Teaching Hospital where he was placed under quarantine conditions and closely observed. I received daily updates from the team of doctors there while we took precautionary measures to mount additional blockades around the cantonment (please kindly refer to my memo on additional steps we took upon learning of the disappearance of the ITE: NGR/2020/MITE/29980). We also dispatched a squad to the ICU to provide supplementary security measures.

The doctors informed me by phone that they were monitoring *Subject 1*, but that he was evincing symptoms they had not associated with COVID-19. *Subject 1* was reportedly in a vegetative state resembling a coma, but still seemingly capable of localized motor functions. It was baffling to the doctors, who took extra precautions given our uncertainty about where the ITE had vanished to. The

of nameless diatoms, the secretions of cyanobacteria, tropical reefs and rivers and lakes, to sea ice and travelling desert sand in transatlantic winds. To breathe is to be dispersed, to be undone, to be beside oneself. To breathe is to die.[4]

"Alright, let's um…let's try this one more time. Like I um said before, yesterday, and the day before, my name is…"

Ah. The furtive gestures of oxygen molecules allegro. That sportive burst of…

"…with the authorities here. I work mainly as a psychologist. I'm here to ask you a couple…"

We should close our eyes. Let's savour this mellifluous moment together.

"…questions. Do you, do you understand what I am saying? Do you understand why you are being detained? Can you hear me?"

He looks through his notes again, but there is nothing there to counsel him. Nothing except the rumbling in his belly. His anger will give him direction, cure his stutter.

"30,000 people," he says under his breath, his one restless foot stamping an invisible cigarette out, his head buried in his notes, as if considering the number for the first time.

"Did you know that? 30,000 people are now dead, because of you?" Now he's looking at us. The last three words spit venom from his forked tongue. "Mothers, fathers, people I know. You took them!" He swings his arm around his chair like a conductor inciting the trombone section. "Behind that glass is a rage the likes of which I've never seen. They want to chew…no, you know what, I'm wrong, I apologize: *they don't want to chew you up*—they want nothing to do with you! They won't touch you with a Bluetooth connection if you could receive signals. They want to nail you to a stake and burn you and incinerate every memory of your coming. And I don't blame them. In a few weeks, you've infected hundreds of thousands of bodies, separated families, shut down schools, closed restaurants, stolen trillions from the global economy, stopped planes from travelling, barricaded borders. You closed entire continents! Last week, my 6-year-old nephew watched a football match on television. Know what he told me? He said it seemed strange and sad that there was no one in the stadium to applaud his side's goals. *That's you!* You did this. You've turned the world into an empty shell of itself, a

pantomime with neither music nor gesture! Are you listening? Are you fucking listening to me?"

We are listening.

"Now here's what we are going to do," he continues, his yellow slit eyes locked on ours. "You could either speak with me and help me understand what you are here for, why you have visited our world, breached our borders and broken us—*or*, I could walk out of here and give those angry guys the signal! And then—," he claps his hands together. *We think he means to say we will be killed.*

What's it going to be, he says. And he says it with a strong gaze—his many eyes dancing in their bulbous apertures. There's shuffling behind the scene. They are impressed. They say to themselves that he has cracked, that he is finally putting the procedural niceties of his discipline aside. Good for them. But—oh!—*has he cracked!* They don't know by how much! He is flowering now, bleeding brightly coloured plumage from behind him. The feathers fan out, quivering under their own weight, curling up beneath the ceiling. Spectral bodies rise and roll across his skin, tugging and pulling like lovers under a thick blanket. The musicality of his ferocity is not lost on us either.

Should we tell Braveheart? Should we tell him who we seek?

He sighs and his massive head drops in resignation. *Sighs*, beautiful pieces of music. Stretched lungs, re-inflated alveoli, no thought required.

He stands to leave the strange room with white walls, a blinking fluorescent tube, a purring ceiling fan, a clock that suggests time itself is broken and the rusty chair we are handcuffed to. He is leaving us.

"Mother, Braveheart."

Our voice shakes him, this Braveheart—yes, that's his name; it catches him off guard. It's the first time we've spoken since we were brought here three days ago. Suddenly, there's more music streaming from behind the shrouded glass.

"What? What did you say?"

"Mother. We are looking for mother."

and social distance boxes, it is not us that will emerge, but *monsters*, new forms of tentacularities and new response-abilities alive to the sensuousness of the more-than-world in its ongoing orgasmic materialization. It is my prayer that wherever you are, wherever you are disturbed, you find, claim, and make sanctuary.

Addendum: The Inflection

INTERNAL MEMO: NGR/2020/MISC/013822
To: The Honourable Minister of Defence
From: Lieutenant General Aliyu Dantata
Subject: Re: Re: Re: URGENT: Details on the Containment and Interrogation of the ITE at the Virus Insurgency Cantonment
cc: Chief of Army Staff

Sir,

I write this report fully convinced that we are now dealing with something stranger than the entity described in my initial orders to head the Ikoyi C.Vir.1 ITE (Intra-Terrestrial Entity) containment unit. I write knowing full well that the narrative I am about to offer stretches credulity. I understand the career-ending risks of typing these words, but I will rather tell the truth and conceivably help defend my country than be quiet to escape ridicule. I fully accept whatever measures the Presidency is taking to reprimand me for my failure to explain the disappearance of the ITE.

I will now recount the events as a partial witness to what we are now calling "The Inflection".

We recruited Dr. Abayomi I. Braithwaite (henceforward, *Subject 1*) to interrogate C.Vir.1 ITE two weeks ago.

Subject 1, a capable clinical psychologist and senior lecturer at the University of Yaba, was recommended by the Vice Chancellor of said university, recently deceased Professor Festus Alabi, who is a ranking member of the Presidential Committee on Virus Eradication Strategy. We conducted a background check and *Subject 1* came clean: the only matter of note for me was his upbringing as an orphan at the Braithwaite Little Angels orphanage, now closed due to unethical practices and poor administration.

At 1809 hours on the 19th of March 2020, *Subject 1* entered the interrogation room where he had been engaging with the ITE

would sharing jealousy look like? What might remembering the invisible/invisibilized look like? What might research with your furniture open you up to? Could we glimpse other visions of life-death by ritualizing loss, taking our monsters to picnics, or writing poems to Hathor?

5. **Your feelings are public events, listen to them and share them:** From a familiar perspective, the container is breached, and an insurrection of viruses is going on. From another perspective, we are recreated in the breach, our bodies molecularly infused with alien feelings, conceptions, and imaginations that were not present (or at least dormant) prior to the disruption. The COVID-19 phenomenon is producing *data*, spilling into the rationalized order a consortium of thoughts and affects that may potentially inflect our bodies. Viruses are effective and agential in more than one way: they infect and inflect, they exoticize bodies and mark collectives. Last week, my family gathered to share stories about what we think is happening in the world today. We will continue to do so, to listen to our own bodies as if they were antennae picking up signals too fine to be noticed by our nation-state/scientific response apparatus.

6. **Play, seek the others, seek wild coalitions of unexpected others:** Perhaps most important for me is how the COVID phenomenon feels like an invitation to the joy of insignificance. To research this vast field opening at the touch of a virus, I must make my children my elders, confer with them as I would with reputable philosophers, and learn to sit at their feet. It's a strange undoing of usual forms, and it often gets a little awkward when I think I know better than our daughter but allow her to dance in her not-knowing-pretending-to-be-insight anyway. Our children exceed their utilitarian assignments; smallness need not be instrumental to bigness to matter. With-nessing our children at play is a form of making sanctuary that might just help us come to touch guests we've shut out for a long time: our own inner children.

Making sanctuary is activism. Postactivism. Making sanctuary is racial transformation, ecology-building work, social transformation, a dalliance with the impossible. It is my hope that if or when we emerge from our bureaucratically neat confinements

Mother: A portrait of a killer, a killer of a portrait

Pangolins. Amplifier hosts. Bats. Dead relatives. Tesla. Chinese authoritarianism. Coronaviruses. Evolution. Trump. Favelas. And chicken with a side of French fries. That's all on the menu at *Oak*, 3019 Beacon Avenue South, Seattle. February 26. A diet of chatter and batter.

Bob Marley's textured cry serenades the crowded restaurant. There's never a good time *not* to genuflect before the King of Reggae. My lips mouth the words to Marley's '*Wait in Vain*' as I turn to my esteemed company: my host, a Zen priest (who leads an organization I have come to do business with), another Zen priest and his wife. By the time my order of chicken and fries materializes before me, summoned by the hands of a smiling dreadlocked black waiter, we four are already swimming in curdling waters thick with conversations about my recent trip to Brazil, about what brings me to Seattle, about my incessant travelling. About life and dying. About the novel coronavirus, whose footfalls and the tremors that result are barely felt across the state of Washington. This is unusual company. It is not every day that one gets the opportunity to discuss such deep matters with two Zen priests and a sensei.

I offer a thought experiment. Imagine the authorities announce that the new coronavirus, unlike any other virus they've ever studied, prolongs life indefinitely, effectively zombifying the infected—making it impossible for a human body to die. *Would you willingly allow yourself to be infected by the virus?* The table is split. One priest, the abbot of the temple I have temporarily taken up residence in, says he'll take the virus. His wife gently disagrees. *Life should not stretch on indefinitely. It is beautiful because it ends*, she says. Her husband agrees, but points out that durability is not necessarily correlated with diminishing quality, and that if a hypothetical infection could make it more likely for him to enjoy and discover the many secrets of the universe, he'd be happy with the deal.

My friend and host, the other Zen priest, smiles to himself as he relieves another chicken bone of its meat. He knows the answer doesn't matter as much as the questions we can now ask. *When does biological longevity cease being life, and—while we are at it—when, if ever, does dying become redeeming?* What matters is what such thought experiments—and the ponderous approach and voyages

of the super-immigrant coronavirus and media-styled Angel of Death (whose consequential arrival in the United States is a matter of when)—might teach us about ourselves, about the material constructs we inhabit, about the worlding practices that reinforce the bubbles we struggle to leave behind.

As we walk back from our meal, slinging bags of take-out like promissory notes to our refrigerators, I am reminded of the parable within Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*—the story of the Grand Inquisitor of Seville, a pale relic of a man and church administrator who mobilizes his extensive powers to incarcerate the now-returned Christ. The Grand Inquisitor tells the now-imprisoned Jesus that the church rejects him, and that his capture is necessary for the church's fabulous reign and hold on power. The messianic is hardly comfortable even to those who pray for salvation.

I start to think of the new coronavirus in messianic terms. As a Second Coming of sorts. And why not? Haven't we learned that the messianic never shows up in the ways we expect? We imagined the messiah hoisted in mid-air, garlanded in rushing cloud, glory and trumpet. Is it possible instead that the messianic flashes through not as a conquering ruler, but as the moment the curtained veil between the holy and the pagan is ripped apart? Not as the televised arrival of a bold and new society that works for all or as the cumulative efforts of conscientious activists, but as a microscopic disanthropocentric insurgent stealing its way across borders, through bodies, across continents of ideas that have historically privileged large scale and size as the only things worth counting upon? Is it possible that the end of world is not down the line, but that it already happened (and happens again and again in 'dimensions' we cannot sense)? And is it possible that all the talk about the end of world discloses the constraints on our shared imaginations, our own biological and epistemological priorities as surface-walking city-dwelling bipeds? What other perspectives, regimes of visuality, and imaginaries are possible when we decenter this view from the centre? What might a virus think about our infatuations with survival and permanence?

When the queerness of the messianic infiltrates the normal, the familiar becomes strange and thus visible—and we are afforded an opportunity to notice ourselves as if for the first time. Just in the same way that microscopy doesn't reveal what microbes

become racialized, how our formulations and enactments of justice further entrench us in the systems we find oppressive. It is a reframe of those activities that allows us ask new questions about what we are doing, but also—suddenly open for our potential inspection—the doings we are already immersed in. Making sanctuary is not a place for answers, for wholeness, for spiritual bypasses, for 'going deeper'. It is a compost heap, a burning bush. A place that demands we lose our sandals in order to approach; a moment that is fuelled by the disclosure of wounds and fissures. It is not a human product (in the same way that the church was not the fugitive's invention), though we can approach it with hesitation. It is a sacredness of the trickster's crossroad, a site that will often not be available, that will often resist our attempts to conjure or invoke it. It is not fully a tool we can deploy, it is a meeting, a technology of the many, an experiment in shapeshifting.

4. **Touch the tender places; that's where the wound is:** Decolonization is not a return to a fixed past or the resuscitation of a pure original. Decolonization is never done; it never arrives, it can only approach. Something is always at stake; something is always haunted and troubled. The place of the decolonial is the site where we sit with the trouble, engaging it, knowing that we are embodied by our relationships with our shadows. I have often noted that the expression, "think outside the box", is exactly how boxes think. Decolonization recognizes we are the boxes we want to jump out of, the knots on the string we want to unravel. The challenge is to hesitate from villainizing these social productions and practice coming to *touch them*, to ask questions of them, to play with them and see where they lead. This suggests decolonization, like fugitivity, is occupying the weird and rejected places of modernity. Occupying the insane, the hospitable, the uncertain, the unintelligible. These engagements compose a form of encounter different from the ones characterized by victors and losers. Is there a place of sitting with the troubling geological and colonial body of Man? Is there a site of 'study' (not necessarily underlined by academic disciplinarity) where we might allow the topics and matters that we usually don't make space for to thrive? What

recognize that this is a moment of invention, of decorating the contours of our uncertainty, and perhaps being invited to notice the world differently. In Oaxaca, Faro, Rio de Janeiro, California, Devon, and Delhi, we are building altars to grief; convening Zoom circles to sing to each other; assembling curious assemblages composed of tears, pictures, and fire. We are experimenting with minoritarian assemblages: that is, assemblages that are not about bringing 'lower beings' and 'inanimate things' up to our level, but about *going down* to where they are and approaching them as co-creators of the next. These assemblages produce an affective field of humility that reworks our desires, stimulates new visions of the im/possible, and gestures towards the decolonial.

2. **Making sanctuary is intergenerational work:** Social isolation is a construction, a performance, that re-privileges the visible, the present, while dismissing the collectives that are always a part of our 'isolation'. We are not alone and have never been. The recognition that to be human is to draw upon the more-than-human repurposes social isolation as a matter of accounting for the *others*. The decolonial work of composting 'Man', central to making sanctuary, is always a vocation of the more than human. Social isolation is impossible. Making sanctuary is irreparably community work—a community of lichens, redworms, loamy soils, diatoms, deer, tree, plastic scraps, phone sets, viruses, Bakhitas, ancestors, speculative fictions and failure. Even when it seems isolated and distant, making sanctuary is complex and intergenerational, bearing the desires, notions and dreams of those who have gone before into the thick now: *physical contiguity is no barrier to entanglement.*[43]

3. **Making sanctuary is always partial, modest and emergent:** How does making sanctuary feed into the work that has to happen? Racial justice? Social justice? Environmental justice? Making sanctuary notices that agency is shared and not a property of one species above any other. Our imaginations of what to do, where to go next, where we must walk out from, are co-productions of complex heterogenous networks of beings/becomings. Additionally, making sanctuary is not a replacement for organizing, for thinking through how bodies

actually look like, but is a performative, contingent situated form of seeing[5] emerging from a human eye-microscope-microbe apparatus that 'selects' certain microbial images (while diminishing and cutting out other imaging possibilities) and tells us more about the values, priorities, agendas, practices, philosophies and motivations of the apparatus, the reductionistic image of the virus endemic to modernity—as a pathogen, as a thing to wage war against, as an enemy, as an infinitesimally tiny and localized dead 'thing' that causes disease, as the active ingredient in a pandemic—is just one mode of *seeing viruses.*

This mode of seeing, this portrait of the virus as a blot on the otherwise pristine surface of life, as a grim reaper, is electrifyingly alive in the ongoing negotiations with the current COVID-19 pandemic. The ensuing planetary ethic that is materializing in form of "social distancing" strategies, press gaggles and presidential lecterns, deserted airports and empty benches in Seville, and the material hope for a return to the normalcy of daily life as we once knew it has a recognizable plot, a fable thick with heroes and monsters.

Let's briefly trace out this epic saga a little.

The 'origin' of the novel coronavirus is not fully clear. Some scientists suggest that the source of the virus may be bats or pangolins.[6] Of course, there are rumours the virus was manufactured in a secret laboratory and then released into the world. While I no longer find it helpful to simply dismiss such claims as conspiratorial rubbish, there is little or no evidence I am in touch with to point us in that extraordinary direction. Indeed, an analysis into the proximal origin of the SARS-CoV-2 virus performed by the Scripps Research Institute found no evidence of engineering, and declared that the virus is a product of natural evolution.[7] But evidence (or the lack thereof) doesn't always stop a good conspiracy in its tracks—*which is a good thing* because evidence itself is partial and never fully accounts for shows up as 'real'. Perhaps we can find a healthy way to honour the sentiment that there is much more to the coronavirus than what is officially reported—without privileging science as a foundational/universal/value-free way of knowing the world, and while avoiding the trap of falling headlong into an unquenching cesspit of despair-powered fantasy.

In the emerging official account, the *site of the crime* may have been the wet markets of Wuhan, a city in the Hubei province of China.[8] A wet market (as opposed to a 'dry market' that deals in durable products), found world over, is a complex of stalls that sells perishable items such as meat, fish and the produce from 'exotic' animals not usually available to the wider population. I grew up near two or three wet markets in Lagos, where my mother often sent me to purchase some meat products, fish and, our favourite, *pònmó* or processed cow skin. Most trips were like excursions to hell for someone as anal as me. The roaring, unappeasable chaos of bodies, voices, spillages, fights, and other kinds of unnameable events gave those wet markets a phenomenal distinguishability as processing sites for monstrous exchanges.

Needless to say, I never went back home with exactly what my mother had instructed me to buy: something else—from whatever was lurking within the greasy hands of the sellers who handled our food to stowaway meat parts and vegetables—always came along for the ride.

Likewise, somewhere within the Wuhan matrix of stalls, bargaining, trading, and bloodletting, from within the mangle of human and animal bodies tied in intimacy, a process called "zoonotic spillover" made it possible for the novel coronavirus to jump from bat or pangolin (ideally from a reservoir host to an amplifier host) and then to humans. With zoonotic transfers, a bat's immune system would have to be stressed enough and compromised by biological and environmental factors for the virus it already carries to be 'expressed' and excreted, leading to infections.[9]

The rest is now recent history. From the presumed epicentre in Wuhan, the virus jumped across bodies, slinked its sensuously shaped protein exterior across handshakes, slipped into nostrils and cracks on skin surfaces, got spat out and sneezed out on doorknobs and presumptuously clean surfaces, flew in first class from terminals in Europe and Asia and the Americas, floated in the air awaiting human vehicular rides to brand new locations, melted through our affection and hugs as we latched ourselves to those we left behind, and settled in our lungs. And all of this without a visa. Or a brain.

But brainless as it may be, unburdened by philosophical discussions about mind-body dualisms, the several strains of

medicine of the moment, a gift that interrupts the steady stream of centrality that holds us aloft in our notions of exceptionality. There are other matters afoot, matters that exceed us. Far from being a story of unvarnished human triumph, the Passover is a myth of modest alliances with the nonhuman and the more-than-human. With doorframes and lambs and goats and hyssop branches and unnameable spirits. The focus of the tale, like in the libation myth from Egypt, is not human salvation; it is the indeterminacy of smallness and the generosity of stepping aside for other doings to have their way. It is about the messianic quality of what shows up even in the modesty of the ordinary.

As I cast a glance at the faces of my wife, my daughter, my son, my family, I suspect that we are practicing a deterritorialized kind of Passover; I reckon we are learning a way of staying with the trouble when escape isn't an option; I imagine we are cultivating ways of tilling the soil of hopelessness and generating new senses while in 'Egypt' (or, as the Jews call it, "Mitzrayim", meaning "a tight place").

We are in the cargo hold of the slave ship sailing as Yemoja's womb towards the unexpected. Far from being locked in, we are digging into the cracks. Far from awaiting the normal, we are learning the lexicon of a weird politics, a posthumanist inquiry into the 'missing others' whose contribution to our subsidized world is hardly ever acknowledged. Far from making do, we are making sanctuary.

With no particular order in mind, I share the ongoing tenets and activating concepts of *our*[42] emerging practices in *making sanctuary* with you—knowing a full disclosure is never possible:

1. **Do not let your appraisal of the problem get in the way of your appreciating the crisis:** The problem might desire a solution, but the crisis yearns for a rite of passage. The crisis is the invitation and the eloquence of the impediment, the Sphinxian riddle faintly glimpsed in the sweltering heat of the desert. In my family (and my family is large: containing not just my families of orientation and procreation, but my f*amily of co-creation*—The Emergence Network—spread out across the globe, greeted in pixels, partners in study and fugitivity), we recognize that the official story of the nation-state leaves out the other movements and possibilities. We

than three thousand years ago. One that feels true even if we can be certain it didn't *happen*.

The Israelites are on the verge of an exodus. Moses, their leader, has failed to strike an agreement with the Pharaoh of Egypt regarding the manumission of his people. God is furious and sends locusts, bloodied waters, frogs, boils, lice, flies, hailstorms, livestock pestilence, and darkness. But Pharaoh is not impressed.

Then God pulls from his sleeves his final trick. He sends an angel of death, but not before instructing the Israelites to paint their doorposts with the blood of sacrificed lambs and goats, go indoors, lock up and wait till morning. The angel would see the blood marks and *pass over* the home that has been so marked.

That night, the monstrous leaks into the assemblage and upsets the established order. In the morning, mothers not of the Israelite camps find out their firstborn sons are dead. Their screams hang over Egypt like a leitmotif of rebuke and horror. Pharaoh's confidence is rent. Defeated, he gives the order to let the Israelites go.

In these times when a different angel of death prowls the highways and streets, and governments are issuing hasty lockdown orders, it's easy to think our poetry and paintings and splashes of pink on paper are lost in the maelstrom of madness and hope that is the pandemic. It's easy to feel small and insignificant in the face of such huge shifts around the world.

To be honest, most times I feel whatever we do—whether it is to write poems about the virus, or it is to wash and kiss each other's feet in ceremony—is brutally insignificant. In fact, there's a pervasive sense of helplessness we all feel—at least this is true for EJ and me. Every new day feels like the previous: live updates depict mounting fatality figures, news anchors remind us to wash our hands (often forgetting that those without clean running water and a house cannot wash their hands), and newspaper reports try to spin positive developments on the search for elusive coronavirus vaccines. From the lofty perspective of the global system, the cumulative effect of our little units of compliance should add up to a hopeful and eventual restoration of the normal, or at least a slightly reconfigured normal.

If the fugitivity of the Passover is anything to go by, then it is just within reach to imagine that *feeling helpless* may be part of the

the novel coronavirus show the intelligence and genius of the nonhuman. By March 11, when the World Health Organization decided to declare the spread of the COVID-19 disease a pandemic, the world had already been turned upside down. The virus helped tank the stock market in the US, inducing the worst percentage drop in the Dow Jones and the S&P 500 since 1987, wiping away trillions of dollars in earnings. It's not just earnings that fell though: carbon emissions dropped by 15% to 40% across China's major industrial sectors. Air quality in Delhi and Mumbai, the worst in the world, is now within the "healthy zone" due to the lockdown instigated by the virus.[10] Airlines around the world slashed their capacity, parked their planes, and buried their prices—publicly begging customers to fly and privately begging their governments for subsidies.

Perhaps most noticeably, the virus is revealing how fragile *power* is: it is upending the mystical might of China's impregnable authoritarianism by disclosing the blind spot of a surveillance state;[11] it is disturbing the binary equation that casts US Democrats as polar ideological opposites of their Republican counterparts (in the ways the virus has brought both tribes together to agree to a stimulus package that was, only just a few weeks ago, the laughable and disposable contribution of a fringe Democratic candidate, Mr Andrew Yang); it is waxing poetic and eloquent about the fragility of neoliberal capitalism, about the unsustainable ways we produce and make food available to people, about the hollowness of jobs and the insanity of development,[12] about the ritualistic emptiness that characterizes our work cultures and manners of congregating, about the defunctness of citizenship and the paraphernalia of 'rights' and entitlements that stabilize the citizen, about the complexity and indeterminacy of the future. About the powerless of power—and the availability of *other spaces of power.[13]* About the violence of the Anthropos. These are the markings of a messianic breach, when a transversal disrupts the normal, potentially changing it forever.

Of course, mentioning these effects are not a way to claim that the virus is a *good* thing. Obviously, there have been unfortunate effects tied to the phenomenon. With hundreds of thousands of people sickened and tens of thousands now dead, communities

across the planet are taking protective measures to keep themselves safe. Racial stereotypes and xenophobic epithets—sayings like "Chinese virus" or newspaper publications about the "Yellow Alert"—that paint Asians as vectors of disease, fundamentally backward and disease-prone have skyrocketed.[14] Here in India, lower-class migrant workers stuck in limbo between the government's ill-timed withdrawal of transportation services and their need to hastily leave the clogged up cities for their homes in the villages cast in bold relief the political dimensions of the coronavirus pandemic.

Given the abovementioned effects, it is impossible to see the virus as the elaborately protein-walled mishmash of genomic materials that we are heavily conditioned to see it as. The images of blob-like *little suns* with nondescript parts associated with the coronaviruses like SARS-CoV-2 (and SARS and MERS), and mass-produced by media and graphic artists, are *measurements* that prioritize certain agendas to the exclusion of others. Are we looking at the virus when we look at these images? Or are we examining and participating in a *particular measurement* of 'the virus'?

Remember the human eye looking through a specific type of microscope to view a microbe. Remember that we are not actually *looking at the microbe* (as if we've been granted unspoiled access to the microbe *as it really is beyond material contingencies*), we are *co-creating/co-manufacturing* an image. Seeing is a strategy, a co-production across heterogeneous bodies.

Modernity is a ground of priorities that instigates the quest for reductionistic images, solutions, and categories...for simple Cartesian causes in a sacrosanct cause-and-effect system. Accordingly, viruses are properly biological matters, according to the prevalent account. However, we are learning that viruses are also political events, geographical events, matters of racial justice, spiritual concerns and social issues. What modernity calls the 'virus' exceeds its specifications.

That is, the COVID-19 phenomenon is more than just the story of an escaped virus causing havoc outside of Pandora's Box; it is a complicated network of bodies in co-constitutive mutuality and emergent relationships. SARS-CoV-2 is not just the *virus itself* but, to borrow the term introduced by Karen Barad, an intra-action[15] between the virus and humans, pangolins and bats,

overheard offering breathless commentary, as their phone films through their window a family of deer strolling down an eerily empty street somewhere in North India. In yet another video clip, masked officials congregate a group of migrant workers (considered the lowest class in India) like a herd of bison and hose them down in the open, clothes and all. Nobody bats an eyelid about the obvious maltreatment of these workers; they are much too concerned with the official count of infected persons steadily ticking up, dragging the casualty figures in its wake.

This is not a drill. The settling realization that we've only just begun to live out our long sentence provokes a suggestion. My wife, EJ, says, "Let us all write poems to the coronavirus." It feels right, like a well-constructed sentence. Alethea, our six-year-old unschooled iconoclastic daughter is thrilled. She has always been complaining about the amount of time her dada spends on the laptop: this feels like a break. Anytime spent together with her family, in slow and shared moments, makes her come alive. Kyah, our two-year-old Tarzan, couldn't care any less about whatever conspiratorial stuff the rest of us are up to.

Alethea gets the pieces of paper. We sit together in a circle. And then we write. Alethea addresses the virus, thanking it for helping us stay together to play and not be so busy. She acknowledges the mayhem and tragedy occasioned by its coming but manages to balance a sense of wonder and a sense of loss in a few words.

I write about a girl and a dragonfly, and how the dragonfly carries new universes on its tail. EJ writes *as* the virus, as a monster that will be silent no more, that will no longer stand by the side of the road. She concludes her poem revealing her "virus" to be a 'hush', referencing the creatures found in my book, 'These Wilds Beyond our Fences'.

Then we draw and paint a shared portrait of salient ideas and impressions from each of our pieces on a single sheet of paper. In a minute, the paper is flush with pink dots, restless lines, grunge marks, trees bending in the wind, stick children at play, and a giant dragonfly with delicate wings embroidered with floral patterns.

As we compile our research into a bundle, I wonder about another lockdown procedure that supposedly happened more

deal of cultural work, but they do not do it nicely…They not only challenge and question; they trouble, they worry, they haunt…They break and tear and rend cultures, all the while constructing them and propping them up."[38] Revisiting the now defunct practices of claiming sanctuary might gently urge us to consider the centrality of the monster to the work of transformation. Why does the monster guard the sacred? Monstrosity is the grounds and conditions for modesty, a testament to the contingency of form and the promise of transformation.

It is as if the hagoday, the Sanctuary Knocker, said to those who grasped its closed ring: *"Who dares claim sanctuary? Who dares beseech my trouble? If you will enter through my maws, know this: you will not arrive intact. Abandon all hope. Abandon the justice of the law. You are mine now, and I will have my libation of blood. I will eat you up, rip your flesh from your flesh, slash your body open and keep your wounds fresh enough so they never close. And then you might become something else. Something you already are but do not know how to notice on your own. Enter at your own risk."*[39]

Making sanctuary, an inflection of the 'original' practice of granting asylum, is the decolonial constellation of technologies, a multi-species gathering, and a cultivation of attention to an insurgency that calls on us to practice demise, to fall down to earth, to compost the humanities and craft 'humusities'.[40] It offers techniques, creative experimentation, movements, gestures, figures, speculations, failures, concepts, art, and wisdoms that might bring us to the place the minoritarian others congregate.

Activist: The times are urgent, so let us slow down

No missile monsoons rain down on our house, but the feverishly delivered news bits remind us India and its more than a billion citizens are nevertheless at war. We had read the updates in the morning online: the Prime Minister had extended the lockdown till the end of April. There was even some speculation the lockdown might be extended till September.[41]

Social media and WhatsApp groups circulated videos of policemen crashing into street cricket games, wielding huge sticks as their motorbikes sent scantily clad children scrambling for a place to hide. In another video, a child squeals with joy, her father

Asian stereotypes, discourses about communism and democracy, the failure of nation-states, the spectre of the military, the sham of American exceptionalism, the dwindling prospects of justice, ethical practices in journalism, culinary preferences, the chemical inducements and affective states of city-dwelling, and even fabulations and conspiracies about hidden agendas and population-erasing protocols.

From a flat ecology approach (a way of performing the world that decenters and deprioritizes humans as the core around which ecologies and meanings spin), *humans* and *viruses* are not stable things—neither are their roles as *hosts* and *pathogens*, respectively. None are privileged above the others in a final, pre-relational way.[16]

When the Yoruba people of West Africa, of which I am a member, speak about *Ayé*, for instance, they hint at a web of lively becomings that resists the kind of identity grid architecture that modernity (also fluid and emergent—though not in its own appraisal) is known for. They will sometimes think of a sickness as the gesture of an ancestor trying to reach the subject, and they will often think of wellbeing as an ironic precursor to ruin and destruction. They understand that one must be careful about who or what you name an enemy or a friend.[17]

In the words of a friend, Charles Eisenstein, the protracted war against the imagined portrait of viruses—in this specific instance, the novel coronavirus—is likely to leave us susceptible to more viruses. To put it mildly, the coronavirus phenomenon is us—and yet it is not *about* us. Its origin is not Wuhan (origins are difficult to decipher in a relational universe); its heroes and villains or main actors are not humans. Its main dimensions are *yet to come*. We are meeting ourselves, our systems, our borderlands and hinterlands, our children (safely exiled in the loving arms of schools), our punctured bubbles, via the transversal disruption of this visitor.

Perhaps nothing could more powerfully drive home the point that thinking about viruses as purely external things we can wage war against is a strategy that is itself complicit in the creation of the pandemic than the archaeological fingerprints of viruses left not in the soil but in our own bodies. The trousseaus of ancient parents to their children. The relatively new discipline of paleovirology, which seeks to study viruses that existed in the past by coupling together

their 'fingerprints' (evolutionary effects, genomic fragments) left behind in present organisms, disturbs the account of viruses as single portrait killers bent on wiping us out. What emerges is a paleoviral record of viral fossils that speaks about the conflicts, secretions, disturbances and worlds that co-produced the one that now makes us possible.[18] The forensic evidence suggests that viruses are our ancestors, without whom the humanity we seek to protect may not have been possible.

Viruses are not external forces invading us. They have a kind of external interiority or interior externality, like a panentheistic conception of deity (in which 'god' is all of the universe but is not equal to or reducible to the universe), a strangeness that will not be deciphered or rendered intelligible for our sakes.

Even the scientific thinking that insists viruses are dead things, not alive, seems to make short shrift of the compelling story of their world-traversing travels and stunning contributions to our understanding of what life and death might mean. There's a lot we do not know about viruses.

Carl Zimmer writes in his book, *A Planet of Viruses*, that

Newly discovered viruses like the mimivirus are forcing scientists to rethink what it means to be a virus in the first place. Their old rules, once so ironclad, are buckling. And as scientists debate what it means to be a virus, they are debating an even bigger question: what it means to be alive.[19]

Are they dead? Are they alive? Can we consider other ways of framing the question? Maybe viruses, like earthly researchers, constantly invite us to revisit our notions of life. Maybe they are saying death needs a new cosmology.

At least that much is clear from research that tries to understand why unicellular microbes spontaneously commit suicide in a process called apoptosis. Not only do these critters die, their deaths do not fit neatly into the narrative that makes death a servant to life, an adaptive evolutionary response whose utilitarian calculations are to produce more life. They are not part of larger cell structures, and yet their coordinated, synchronized suicides mean death is not the *other* of life, the enemy to be stamped out.[20]

In 2018, scientists estimated that the largest biotope on Earth, the deep biosphere, a subsurface world of microbial forms ('zombie

together when the skies are darkened by forces heavier than our lips can utter.

In the Alaskan Inuit culture, the darkness is an ally in the cultivation of songs for their whaling ceremonies. Songs and celebration attend every part of the whale hunting ceremony: reinforcing weapons, communing with the whales, keeping the weather safe.[36] These hunting songs are often co-invented in a dark room of a special house. While seated in the dark, the hunters are said to sit in thick silence and with great anticipation for the lyrics of the song-to-come. There, in the alchemy of darkness, the whale song sprouts, bursting forth from this notable interspecies relationship of bodies—men, furniture, silence and darkness. This ceremony of *sitting in the dark, and waiting for something to burst*—or "qarrtsiluni", according to the coastal Inuit people—relieves 'humans' of the burden of creativity and notices the world and the images, ideas, invitations, initiations, actions, gestures, moves and doings it is already abundant with as gifts. The darkness does not get in the way of qarrtsiluni; instead the darkness is the womb, the amniotic space where the once impossible becomes visible.[37]

Likewise, in my readings of pre-modern juridical arrangements, I noticed that the medieval European practice of claiming sanctuary presages an understanding of the role of monsters in transformation. Before the English laws allowing churches to grant sanctuary to fugitives were annulled by an act of parliament in 1623, fugitives from the law could flee to a church building to "claim sanctuary"; they did this by holding on to the hagoday or Sanctuary Knocker of the church—an ornamental piece of furniture that was usually shaped in form of a monstrous beast, a gargoyle or some other fabulous creature with a ring in its mouth. By canonical law, the right of asylum was only afforded to the accused if he or she held on to the *carved head of the monster.* Fugitives could stay in asylum for a while, about thirty to forty days, after which they were supposed to *abjure the realm* and be exiled or risk harsh punishments.

The featuring of monsters may have been a minor accompaniment to the centuries long incidence of claiming sanctuary, a mere accessory in the enterprise. However, monsters themselves uphold a criticality and enormous significance in many cultures. American art historian Asa Mittman writes that: "Monsters do a great

used to. Seeking out new questions. *Becoming accountable* to more than what rests on the surface. *Seeking roots*. In a time when the air between us is not empty, where every available space is teeming with life, where touch involves making life-death calculations—invoking images of stealthy critters making evasive manoeuvres to flee predators—slowing down is about *taking care of ghosts, hugging monsters, sharing silences, embracing the weird*. Making sanctuary.

Making sanctuary

What do I mean by these nice sounding, albeit bizarre, phrases? I will attempt an explanation, but not without first noting that the kinds of moves prefigured by these phrases are not *new*. Many cultures, including mine, learned how to see when things went dark. They encoded their learnings in gestures, in sayings, in dances, in games, in the names and stories they offered children as bonfires coached the night into a tolerable warmth.

For the Yoruba people, prostration isn't just a form of genuflection reserved for men and offered to elders, it is a cosmic ethic about titanic gods and epic monsters whose powers exceed ours, a cautionary tale about what one must do as the storm approaches: "Fall down and stay still."

For many African communities, the techne of pouring a libation harks 'back' to days when Ra, king of heavens, retreated to the beyond, angered that he had been disrespected by humans. Hathor, his daughter-mother-wife is sent to avenge him and reclaim his honour. Hathor's task? Destroy mankind. Hathor takes her tasks very seriously, too seriously. Her riot leaves puddles of blood, severed limbs and heaps of the dead in the wake of her primal rage.

Regretting his wish, Ra tries to rein her in, to protest her fastidiousness, to save mankind. But Hathor cannot be appeased. She carries on until gods and people meet. In one telling, Thoth and Maat, fellow gods, offer a trick: pour red wine all over the land; Hathor will mistake these glistening pools of wine for the blood she failed to drink up the night before. When she gets drunk, she'll forget her directives and sleep. This 'trick' becomes the libation offering that many African communities ritualize as a form of remembrance, an ongoing vocation to never forget the tragedy that is implied in joyful moments, a way of gathering

bacteria' and millions of undiscovered forms and species), had a combined carbon mass that is more than 300 times the carbon mass of humans on the planet.[21] Though studies about viruses in the deep biosphere are few and far between, localized analyses of the viral inventory in sediments demonstrate an abundance of viruses like bacteriophages, attending to those prokaryotic cells.[22] It is as if viruses, neither alive nor dead, agents of creation and destruction,[23] are coterminous with living and dying, tending to *them*, experimenting with the forms *they* take on in an ongoing way, disciplining their boundaries of separability.

At the risk of propagating essentializing concepts, I have often thought of viruses as alter-life principles, tricksters, bringers of conflict that catalyses shifts, like Eshu who brings the slave ships to African shores and travels with the slaves to the New World across the Atlantic, co-occurring with cells, exceeding them in abundance, going *before us* to till the ground of *be-ing*, spilling *behind us* to unsettle the dust of the past, vultures whose midwifery heals the wounds of completeness, pilgrims of death where death is a vast ecosystem of manifold becomings, spillages, sonic/aural textures and im/possibilities.

Perhaps what we obscenely call life surpasses its definitions; perhaps 'life' cannot be lively without its contradiction. The village cannot tell stories or thrive without monsters in the wild—and the moment you try to contain life (or 'death') within the box of longevity, duration, progress, or sustainability, you leave out the avid and stern activism of viruses. The moment we resort to war, to the primacy of vaccines as a *natural* response to viruses, we occlude the agency of these more-than-human beings and shut down a part of ourselves that springs up to the messianic call of dehiscence. The moment we name the colour, we blind the eye.

Are we looking at the portrait of a killer, or do we step back to notice the insidiousness of the portrait—the agency of the image and its instigations, its provocations to war and deadening perpetuity? If we go after the killer, we could win. But then because nothing exists by itself, our winning could lead to the reinforcement of a largely invisible series of actions and processes and ideas—still alive since its theoretical moments of birth in the cosmic hours after the ice age melted away to the

'human'—that have made room for the rampage of this pandemic in the first place.

Without resorting to blame games, reductionistic anti-humanist sentiments, or sociological analyses that simply reach for concepts (like capitalism or whatever) to conveniently villainize, it is important to notice that we are part of this moment. All of us. The images we rudely call 'humans', phones, gut bacteria, air travel, governments, appetites, ideas, Karl Marx, big data, public relations, the scientific establishment, and even God. The lyrics of this song are a contribution of the indeterminate manifold. An apple pie requires an entire universe to exist—so does a 'virus'.

Nothing emerges without its world.

When "Little Boy" blew up about 2000 feet above Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, the initial blast killed an estimated 70,000 people, and hundreds of thousands in the aftermath of the detonation. That nuclear reaction produced new and rare radioactive substances like carbon-14, which escaped into the atmosphere, found its way into our ecosystems and into our cells. If you are alive today, you have a bit of that substance in your body, bomb-pulsing through your veins. You are in part radioactive, a site of ongoing nuclear explosions still mushrooming into the sky with a brilliance brighter than the sun. You are the concretion of manifold events.

The novel coronavirus is likewise the crystallization of the saturated solution of the modern, an arresting of progress, a freezing of forward movement, a fugitive opening in the skin of the oppressive familiar. Somewhere at the crossroads, in the interstitial places and intersections between stacked and bleeding animal bodies, trade and politics, the SARS-CoV-2 virus was alchemized. A *small* moment—yes, just like the Little Boy nuclear bomb *only* had 141 pounds of enriched uranium. The explosions of that viral moment reverberate across bodies, stopping time and everything else in their tracks. We are other-than-human now (perhaps we have always been), our own bodies inquiring and experimenting with alterity. We are meeting the wildness of our own bodies, the monster strapped to a chair, after the end of a world.

Something other than a resolution wants to happen.

the planet where our 'human' form—bold, resolute and sure of its own stability—might be acted upon by molecular tricksters. The legacy-building work of Man must now meet the heat of compost, the fire of demise tended to by Bakhita and the ghastly and spectral presences of drowned bodies, squeezed bodies, monstrous bodies, stubborn bodies.

The COVID-19 phenomenon is a fugitive portal to other possibilities we can barely glimpse but not fully apprehend, approach but never fully arrive at. The messianic opening of *the world-that-might-yet-be* will not be collapsed to terms we can understand, or fully reduced to the world-that-is. This unfurling tornado of geopolitical storms, exotic viruses, hospitalized prime ministers, bedridden celebrities, stunted economies, the shocking inadequacy of medical supplies, jaywalking buffalo, and not-knowing-what-the-next-few-months-might-look-like, is an invitation and opportunity to *unlearn mastery*. To acknowledge the activisms and agency of the nonhuman in its purging critique of 'Man', to sniff out the smells of fugitive paths leading beyond the tight place of the plantation, to wonder about the ways justice and hope are also part of the civilizational map of gaining transcendence, to ask new questions and take up new projects that might help us learn how to die.

Unlearning mastery is a matter of embarking upon decolonial pilgrimages into the dehiscent rifts in the fabric of 'Man'. It is cultivating *fugitive incapacitation*—a 'refusal' to continue along the highway that almost always leads back to reproducing the usual arrangements of power. Instead, fugitive incapacitation is a coalition-building project, sort of a modest, broad-based, never-complete-by-itself ecological ethic of co-experimentation and wild antics that takes us to the roots, mandibles, paws, tentacles, flagella and feet of the more-than-human. modest path that brings us into postures of living-with, listening-with, dwelling-with, experimenting-with, inquiring-with our fellow 'oddkin'.[34] It is allowing ourselves to be acted upon by wild critters and monsters outside the plantation, allowing ourselves to lose our sensual training (and to fail at losing our training) so that other senses of power, of agency, of situated knowing, of grieving, might remake us.[35]

It is a matter of *slowing down*, where *slowing down* is not about reducing one's speed but about lingering in the places we are not

piece meditating on the structural flaws of neoliberalism in a COVID-inflected world,

...this coronavirus is revealing the structural faults of a system that have been papered over for decades as they've been steadily worsening. Gaping economic inequalities, rampant ecological destruction, and pervasive political corruption are all results of unbalanced systems relying on each other to remain precariously poised. Now, as one system destabilizes, expect others to tumble down in tandem in a cascade known by researchers as "synchronous failure."[32]

Even the progressive hope in a future that might work for everyone—and not just the one percent—depends on the architecture of a political project that is disproportionately biased towards concepts of time, concepts of wellbeing, and concepts of agency that reinforce aspects of this wide network called 'Man'.

Where does one go when forward movement is impossible and backward movement is out of the question? I suggest we go awkly into the awk-ward.

In order to find our way then, we must become lost.

Becoming lost may look like going back into the cargo hold of the ship; it may look like any one of the strategies the slaves in Cuba or Brazil or elsewhere in the Americas adopted to hide their gods and visions and stories away from the disapproving eyes of their masters. Long before the slaves of the Antebellum south in the United States started to extricate themselves from bondage, making their way northwards via the underground railroad network (or even towards the Great Dismal Swamp between the North Carolina and Virginia), they practiced fugitivity, encoding their worlds and intelligences in ways the plantation project (calibrated towards narrowly defining and detecting intelligence as literacy) could not compute.

As Fred Moten suggests, "one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism."[33] One does not speak truth to power, one disappoints power's claims to exclusivity and coherence. One undercuts power's definitions. Escape may salve the itch, but it will likely strengthen the crisis.

Fugitivity exceeds marronage.

Perhaps a weird politics might meet this moment. We must act like viruses, and go through the skin of the earth, into the flesh of

The Inception

Early that morning, just before the amaranthine of twilight dipped into the hopeful azure of daylight, night fell.

Two heavy knocks on the door and my apartment bled open to a man in uniform, his bereted head hung low, burdened perhaps by the weight of his importance. He filled the doorway nearly as effectively as the door he had replaced. But his invitation—okay, I'll tell like it is—his *instruction* to me was of great urgency. He didn't shake my hand. He showed me some ID and a typed-up letter on letterheaded paper. Without so much as a by your leave, he brought out a *gun*, well, one of those thermometer infra-red guns, and aimed for my head. In his hands, it was no less threatening than if he was about to put a bullet through my skull.

I was to accompany him to a military facility by means of a vehicle whose plate number was clad in a leather jacket, shielding it from prying eyes. It was a secret mission of some kind—but not so secret if one were following the endless cycles of breaking news about the Virus. He said my university department had recommended me to his boss, and that he would tell me more as soon as I got into the car outside. To his left, my mother's framed picture hung askew, dislodged from its serenity by this rude guest. Her dimpled face is infectious. She is happy here, her gap-toothed smile and scarified cheeks accentuating her riverine beauty. It's how I like to remember her.

You would think I'd be excited about this sudden business. I wasn't. I just wanted to be left alone. Alone with the woundedness of everything, with broken stuff, with black suns and split minds. I should stand up to this big guy and insist that I wasn't available until office hours.

I asked him for a few minutes to get ready.

Closing the door behind me as we made to leave, I stealthily knocked it the third time.

On the way to venue, driving the car through emptied streets as we passed heavily armoured tanks and gun-toting boys in adult costumes, he debriefed me on the matter du jour after many off-the-record questions about me, about what part of Lagos I came from, about where I was schooled, if I was wimpy and scared ("like all those bloody civilians"), about what I was going to do if everything

turned to *shit*, if psychologists could read people's minds (I told him he might have been referring to witchcraft, not psychology), and why I had three pens in my immaculately pressed pocket. Acutely aware of his bulging muscles and his overbearing masculinity, I politely waved aside most of his small talk and urged him to tell me—if it was in fact his job to do so—what the urgency was about. Apparently, they had apprehended the Virus wandering about town, locked it up behind thick panes of glass, and scrambled for the phones. What did they want me for? They wanted me to talk to *it*, to persuade it to share the secrets of its inner workings, its alien biology. They figured they couldn't torture the monster to betray its agenda—and torture was too much of a risk where the Virus, infectious to the nth degree, was concerned.

I was quickly ushered to the arena of action, sprayed with some puffy stuff and handed gloves, and then shown into the inner sanctum where the Virus was and where the huge man's boss awaited me. Three star lieutenant-general so-and-so working directly with the Presidency and bla bla bla. Now *he* was a study in contrasts! His diminutive size and studied gaze cast his real power and self-assurance in bold relief. We already were quite aware of the newly widespread etiquette occasioned by the pandemic: no shaking hands. A manly nod and steely stare would do, thank you very much. I hated him already.

The LG brought me up to speed: the Virus had indeed been apprehended a day before; it seemed compliant when it was arrested. My mission: use my shockingly good psychotherapeutic skills to heal the virus into free association. I started to sweat. I asked if I could get a couch to complete the Freudian scenery, attempting a nervous joke. The general merely carried on, perhaps the comedy app wasn't yet installed in his operating system. "We thank you for your compliance. It's for a good cause," he said monotonically. For a moment there, I thought I might have detected a whiff of trepidation in the hard exterior of his projected self-assurance. I liked him a little then.

A heavy door stood between the Virus and me. A door that led into a small passageway that terminated at a more serious looking door, which opened out into an empty room with white walls and a blinking light. I squeezed the handle three times and pushed it open.

an *insurgency of unintelligibles* to burst forth. But this massive bio-geo-political body has a way of defending itself: it sends in the antibodies of meaning and intelligibility, it offers the framework of capital, it pathologizes the opening, and develops memory cells to ward off further insurgencies—building its immune system against infiltration. 'Our'[29] productive lives, busier and busier, thus shield us from a savage scream, echoes of howling wolves bequeathing the moon with an audience, fragments of other lives that co-inhabit ours. 'Man' has grown resilient in sealing up these cracks, in naming them pathologies, in returning us to the plantation of endless productivity.

In swings the parabolic trajectory of the new coronavirus, a transversal disruption at the edges of the human. The COVID-19 phenomenon manifests a series of fissures—*fugitive openings*, by any other name—in that cling wrap. Wound dehiscences on the body of 'Man'.[30] Openings that will not be easily closed. *These are not metaphors*! One might say this virus has infected (and inflected) the earth-building work of the Anthropos. Like the weft unsettles the warp. The old guards of modern civilization—the nation-state, the market, and the technoscientific complex—are undone in the face of SARS-CoV-2's rampage. Mind you, this is not just another Herculean challenge to test our capacities; it seems nothing we throw at this monster can hurt it.

As noted earlier, this phenomenon calls into question the planetary assemblage of the 'human', disturbs its quest for growth and control, and impedes its desires to forecast into the 'future'. Its effects are partial but nevertheless potent. If we try to control the virus by unilateral eradication, we risk thickening the strand in the complicated web of relations that feels so problematic. In just the same way the slave ships at Cais do Valongo didn't quite disappear but spilled their guts on the shores and became repurposed as cobblestones, streets, highways, shining towers and capital, the virus might metamorphose into another problematic form, carrying on its work through reinforced biopolitical measures that replicate the violence of viral infiltration.[31] In fact, nothing in our collective memory besmirches the integrity of the political projects of conservatives and liberals quite like this viral phenomenon. As Jeremy Lent writes in his

seismic shifts and the earthquakes that reconfigured landscapes and drove populations into caves and places of hiding; and—among others yet to come—the transhumanist quest for transcendent control over death and our emotional states.

'Man' is a cartographical project (a way of finding home again and again), an ecology-building project, an intergenerational intra-species project. A temporality-secreting, terra-forming strategy with a beating heart gifted from the ideas and yearnings of the Enlightenment period. This 'thing' wants control, stability, permanence, eternal growth, and separation from the elements that are its conditions. It works by abstraction, denial, repression, displacement, and the ruthless colonization of other earth bodies—a process euphemistically called 'progress'.

'Man' exceeds the human figure we imagine in our heads, the one supposedly burdened with examining whether his intentions are good or bad. 'Man' is how trees are felled and ecosystems cleared to make room for parking lots, how indigenous peoples in the Americas were exterminated, how mountains were blasted to build a port for ships carrying African generations into Brazil, how we imagine we could unilaterally construct a rational post-racial society, and how Bakhita now screams an alien language at the wilds beyond our fences.

The 'human' isn't a fixed thing at all, ready, sure, already there; it's a Euro-American vocation replete with loss and disappearances and monsters and secretions and microbial transgressions. 'It' is an undiscovered continent with an outline that is markedly different from the shape we are used to. Not drawing the line too closely around the humanoid shape we are used to allows us to see a v*ast body,[28]what the* Iroquois/ Haudenosaunee call the 'long body'. But every '*body*' has ecological consequences and makes its own world.

I have often imagined this immense enterprise of 'Man' as a transparent film or plastic wrap—the racializing glass pane of whiteness—layered above the wildness of things, attempting to discipline these sensuous bodies into rational processes. A regime of stillness. Sometimes we can see the wildness through the film, we can feel the primal chaos threatening to upset the regulated order of things. The cling wrap often wrinkles and tears open, allowing

There was a broken clock. Good. Everything seemed in order then.

There it was. At the far end of the room. My heart skipped ten beats. *It* was a little girl, emaciated, dirty, foreign, and yet with the most piercing eyes I had ever seen. She appeared about six, maybe more. Her hair was tangled in knots, scrunched up into curious balls that completed this shocking picture of misery. For a moment, I looked back at the panoramic stretch of glass where I knew the lieutenant and his overgrown minions were studying my every move. This couldn't be right. But there she...sorry, *it* was. Frightening and strangely magnetizing. The COVID-19 Virus, whose real designation was SARS-CoV-2. Somehow this queer thing was responsible for bodies falling sick world over. As I approached it, a smile yawned across its face—not the kind of smile that involves lips. It smiled with its eyes. They danced behind their unearthly skull as if they were in the presence of an old friend.

Not a word would be spoken in the hours to come. She (damnit!)—*it* was the ultimate client. Getting to crack it open was the most difficult clinical task ever put before me. The lieutenant-general couldn't ascertain her level of language proficiency. In fact, they knew little about what it was capable of. I was to keep trying. If I failed? They'd incinerate it to save the planet. But that was Plan B. Plan A was to get as much intel as possible, enough to help the authorities win the war against Viruses to come. They meant to build a conceptual iron wall, a final guarantee against alien immigrants. They just needed the coordinates of where to start digging. Hour after hour, glove after binned glove, I went in and out of the room, my attraction to it never abating, my fear never subsiding: a curious aeipathy of fascination and dread.

Yesterday, after a long fruitless session with the Virus, the lieutenant-general decided to pull the plug on the whole operation. I asked for one more day. He said, get it to talk—or we are done here.

Now I stand before it, before the Virus. She says she is seeking 'Mother'.

Who in God's mighty name is Mother?

I return to the chair.

"You can talk? All this while–"

"Yes, we can talk."

"Okay. Who is Mother? Are you lost or something? Is there someone else we should be worrying about?"

Its head swivels to the broken clock. And then back to me... slowly...like a predator.

"How tall are you?"

I do not intend to be thrown off the scent. "Is Mother worried about my height? Is this Mother going to hurt more people? You are a Virus. Viruses don't have mothers!" I'm losing it. Nothing in my training has prepared me for this moment.

"Slightly below 6 feet, we reckon", it says to no one in particular.

And then to my horror its restraints fall to the granite floor with a metallic thud, and it rises, floating upwards and then lunging forward towards me. I push back into my seat, falling backwards and crashing into my bent neck as I hear loud screams and muffled sounds coming through the walls. The whole world of sound squeezes into the high-pitched squeal of shock. *It* is standing over my head. I am immobilized by the sheer suddenness of it all. There it is, smiling down at me, its face engorged in the corona of the obstructed overhead light. It stretches out a finger and dips it into my left nostril.

"Breathe," it says.

Darkness falls.

———————

I awake to the sickening smell of excrement and piss, to a bleating goat and the feeling of being suspended in mid-air. I get the feeling I am in an old creaky house that is being turned over on its side—either that or the house in question is rolling down a hill during a stormy night. My eyes search for light to make sense of where I am, but everything around me is of a hazy dream-like composition. To my right, there's a soft river of lunar light streaming from an opening above. I try to move towards it, but then I realize I am immobilized in more than one way. I feel like Gulliver with a thousand Lilliputians dancing on my forehead, ankles and wrists. I am lying down, back to the ground, naked, and stripped of my clothes—but not of my memory: just a while ago—how long a while I cannot tell—I was interrogating the Virus. And then it attacked me and...*where am I*? Did the LG save me? Am I suffering some

fire-wielding, selfie-taking instigator of the Anthropocene. This reductionistic imagination is another instantiation of modernity.

On occasion, we might allow ourselves to notice the conditions that have made the 'human' possible. Then—only then—*things start to look very interesting.*

From the last glacial period eleven thousand years ago when the ice melted long enough to allow the Neolithic revolution and sedentary human settlements to form, and the gastronomical instigations of sugar that motivated the triangular trade across the Atlantic, to the moment Descartes declared 'cogito ergo sum' and the telescope peeked at the curtains of the seventh heavens, the "human" stretches over vast swathes of spacetime. In a sense, the human is a very recent invention. In another sense, it is ancient and has been in the works for a long time: enfolded in lithic conspiracies, tied to heat trends, dripping with the wetness of the reflected moon, tumbled into tools and skirmishes with nonhuman species, emerging from the love entanglements between exploding suns in the sky and a hominid's attempt to stand upright.

What came to be known as the 'human' was measured out in craniometrical figures on the tables of 19th century French anthropologist George Vacher de Lapouge, whose insistence that there were different 'races' with craniometric correlations of intelligence lives on even today. The 'human' (or rather the failure to be one) was burnt into the backs of recently purchased slaves with burning hot steel, marking them as less-than-human or not-quite-human. And today, when the President of the United States calls Nigeria a shithole country, he is inadvertently worshipping the intergenerational notion of the propertied human.

This complex multi-generational project called the 'human', or 'Man' as I prefer to call it (and will use interchangeably with 'human'), is a racial-colonial-geological-technological-biological-theological-political project, a web of processes that includes the participation of African chiefs selling their own to European slavers; the racializing bacterial conversations in gut microbiomes; the recurrent themes and concepts of Euro-American supremacy; the narratives of the Judeo-Christian God who made Man in his image; the conversion regimes of neoliberalism and the *free market*; the struggles for inclusion and equality by proponents of social justice;

I heard her invitation to become unsettled, to meet her on her own terms, without the usual reference points we are used to. I heard her invitation as the promise of monsters immortalized in the terse Gramsci enunciation (*the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters*). I heard her call to descend into *darkness* – not the one that is an adaptive response of light in its efforts to shine brighter, and not the one that is a mere instrument to light, but the one that has imperatives of her own. I heard her call to descend into Blackness. This Blackness I speak of is not the blackness that is incarcerated in the intersectional identity project of post-modernity, the one anchored to the promise of arrival; this Blackness is a monstrous *geological counter-imperial force* flashing up through the ethical and conceptual architecture of modernity—as the globule of purging fire, '*Ase*', which Èsù, whose name's pronunciation is itself a descent in tonality, wields.

I heard her call to embrace "the fecundity of the 'chaos and blackness'[27]—the 'anarchic womb'" of the Deep Under. She calls us to rework our bodies by attending to the seams and stitches that hide beneath the folds of the given.

The fierceness of encountering Bakhita, my mother-sister-cousin-aunty-daughter yet-to-come, marked me so thoroughly that I felt dizzy with the sorrow and joy of it. I sat down with Merced and Petrucio, flanked by my friends who had organized the trip, Camilla Cardoso and Carolina Coutinho. Merced and Petrucio told me stories I dare not repeat here. I in turn shared stories about my journey to Brazil, through my colonized education as a black Nigerian man, through the biopolitics of international airports, and through my slow education into the generosity of hopelessness. She cried hearing my stories. Then she concluded her remarks to me by saying, "I think something is happening everywhere in the world: *cracks are opening up*."

How are cracks opening up? Where are they opening up? And how has this anything to do with the COVID-19 phenomenon?

Composting the 'Man'

When we imagine the 'human' being, we rarely allow our minds to drift far away from the anthropoid bipedal figure at the heart of the modern project: the single-headed, double-armed, upright,

drug-induced hallucination? I blink three times. Nothing. Reality doesn't crack through what must be a dream of perpetual night in the belly of a whale.

That annoying piercing cry rents the air again, and then the whole space—apparently a dank and greasy room full of human bodies—erupts into pregnant whispers and loud sobbing and coughing and the clanging of chains rubbing against their shackles. And then just as suddenly, a preternatural silence descends, the kind my sisters and I, when we were kids, figured was an indication that an angel had just passed. But this isn't a mere silence; I feel as if the room has gone stiff, as if time stood still. Though not even broken time is enough to assuage the terrible whiff that has taken up residence in my nostrils.

What has happened to me? Am I in hell?

"You are in the Abbot Devereux, Braveheart. Wake up."

As if materializing through the curdled blindness of the room, a young slender man, *a boy* in fact, black, scantily clothed, appears above my head. I can see the contours of his face etched by the soft hand of moonlight. It is his eyes and the word, *Braveheart*, that give him away. *Him. It. The Intra-Terrestrial Entity or ITE*, as the LG and all his Matryoshka dolls call it. I hate the self-importance of military parlance. I prefer 'the Virus.'

Somehow, I know him to be the same subject I interrogated for three days, now in a different body. How I know, I cannot tell. His eyes burn with an internal combustion that need no extra illumination.

"The Abbot *what*?"

"If you want to live, you must come quickly," he says, as he melts into the dark, reappearing in several spaces around me. "*She awaits us*."

My legs are freed, my hands too. I pull up my body—but too quickly—and dash my head against something hard I would later discover to be the lower wooden deck crowded with men in a mangled heap of forearms, shackles and gnarled wooden beams. Crawling out, finding there isn't even enough room to stand up straight, I step through armpits and splayed arms and fingers, floating islands of seemingly dismembered limbs and cadavers highlighted by the sadistic artistry of the moon, drawn towards the

boy—now fully bathed in light—at the end of the darkness.

There's something like a ladder there that goes up into a square of light. He takes the lead and climbs out. I follow him, emerging upon an upper deck littered by sleeping men—*frozen* in suspended animation as if by some black and unspeakable magic. Nothing stirs, not even the sails. Not the wind, though I feel it lightly. Everything is *paused*. Well maybe a slow pause. Things are still moving, just not in their usual pace. The swish-swoosh of the waters is ponderously slow, nothing like the rapid chaos you'd expect in the middle of the sea. One wave reaches for the electrified sky streaking with flashes of Sango's argument, spits little wavelets into the cosmic blue-black, and then curls in on itself as it returns to the jealous sea that birthed it—a performance artist in corporeal soliloquy. Still, the sea's thunderous roar, a raucous applause with no crowd and a fitting leitmotif for this most unusual of circumstances, booms.

Of course, by now, all these facts reinforce my suspicion—though it should be obvious by now if the facts presented themselves to a mind less confused: I am on a ship.

This is a cargo ship.

Its cargo? Men and women and children from Africa. Slaves heading for the New World. And I have just emerged from the hold through the hatch. I'm not sure how I know any of this, but I do—and suddenly, very matter-of-factly, I can recall memories of being taken in the dead of the night, by faces I recognized, bound and gagged and delivered to slavers as a prisoner, and then whipped blue and pink by a bearded *oyinbo* whose teeth, I distinctly remember, were browner than my cocoyams.

I get the short-lived impression I am in the clutch of an impressive and elaborate dream, one induced by the viral touch of my former prisoner. But every inevitable footstep forward toward the *boy*, now frantically beckoning me over to the starboard of the ship, makes that theory less plausible.

"Braveheart," he yells above the din, facing me a few inches away, the portrait of calm. "The portal will close soon. There's no time."

The words jump out of me, without my permission: "*What did you do to me*? Why am I on a…on a *slave ship*?"

"What better place to meet than here. At the belly of things. At the place you've always wanted to be in."

unknown sickness after disembarkation. She could have been my mother, my sister. My daughter.

Bakhita spoke eloquently from her resting place, an opening in the ground that felt like a wound in the projects of modernity. Her hole was a punctuation in the civilizational rush towards a post-racial society of equality and peace, immortalized by a monument erected in the wharf. This "strong woman" (as Merced described her to me) wanted nothing of *that*. She did not want heaven. She wanted no equal place on the Titanic. She didn't require an equal piece of a carcinogenic pie. She wanted to be seen, to be remembered and re-membered. She *wanted*—a perverse thing for dead non-citizens to do.

Her very presence felt like an indictment of the surface and the cobblestone streets that were in fact reformulated slave ships. The opening in the ground felt like a crack in the topography and the conditions that make justice a meaningful ideal to aspire to. Bakhita broke in from the lingering past, and upset the manicured arrangements of gleaming towers, anthropocentricity and exceptionality. Her monstrosity, a challenge to the familiar forms 'we' perform. She didn't *fit* in: she was a Frankensteinian monster defiantly rebuking the ideal of hope, protesting the rational order of the Man, the forward-facing progression of clock time, the promise of justice in the by-and-by, the nature of Nature we've taken for granted.

Standing on the thick pane of glass that allowed visitors to the 'Cemetery' to see Bakhita without falling in, I imagined her voice crying through the crack:

Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine.[26]

homes. *They were called 'Tigers' because their skin anomalies looked like laceration marks, like fierce bullwhip cuts burnt into their skin that affected them.*

I walked past the House where Samba began—the home where Tia Ciata, a 19th century black cook, served food freely to black bodies and nourished their souls enough for the first unmistakable rhythms of what would later be known as Samba to steal into the world. Outside the rooms where their lyrical mutiny was taking place, the reformist governments of the city, eager to replicate the glory of European cities like Paris in the tropics, banned music on the streets in a bid to repress the Dionysian energies of the creolized country. But inside Tia Ciata's home, a messianic implosion was building up, and its scale was calibrated to fugitive harmonies the authorities could not compute.

Some hours later, I met Bakhita.

Curled up in her grave, with only her mangled jawbone and her disfigured spine peeping through the brown of the earth, Bakhita greeted me at the Cemetery of the New Blacks, which—by the way—looked nothing like a cemetery. No headstones, no wreaths, no fancy fonts and cupid angels promising a happy heaven. Just the electrifying feeling that something was very much alive in this place of tragic death.

They had found Bakhita among tens of thousands of other black bones dumped in a part of the city where broken ceramics, no longer useful to privileged households, were trashed. Historians suggested many like Bakhita were never sold off to slavers and died at the port. The city, not knowing how to dispose of their bodies, broke their bones and squeezed those black bodies into increasingly tinier spaces, into heaps of rubbish. Bakhita probably occupied that liminal space between disembarkation and the plantations, between remaining unbought and the untold suffering she would have found if she had ventured inland.

A surprising bundle of joy and woman, the curator of the Cemetery, Merced Guimaraes, who with her husband, Petrucio, graciously hosted me, told me that bioarchaeologists felt sure that Bakhita was a woman in her twenties. She may have died on the way to Brazil from Nigeria (where I come from) or from Angola or Cape Verde. She may have survived the trip but then died of an

My clenched silence allows him, *it, whatever*, to keep speaking.

"This," he throws his hands up as if welcoming guests to his brand-new hotel, "this is where our research tells us Mother might appear. This is where we meet our love, yours and ours." He closes the gap and leans in. I cede no ground. At this point, I am more awestruck by the Virus's immaculately human form, his intensely intelligent eyes, than I am frightened about being infected. *He is beautiful.*

"That's right, Braveheart. We are researchers. It's the only thing we know to do." He turns longingly at the sea, its mercurial waves stuck in Shakespearean theatrics. "Have you ever been in love, Braveheart? Do you miss someone so painfully that it defines everything you do? Moulds you from top to bottom?"

I think of the image. Of her. Her joyful smile set in sepia tones. *The life of the party*, they called her.

"Let us tell you a story," he interrupts. "One moment, a billion years ago, we opened our eyes. For the first time. Have you ever seen the sky, curdled like milk, frothing with mystery, prophetic, teeming with things too glorious to be uttered? You think you know Pleiades and Orion. You don't know what we know, what we've seen. The sky shone brighter than the brilliance of chiton eyes." I am not sure what a 'chiton' is. "And yet," he continues, "nothing could compare to the splendour of her beauty."

"There *she* was. Mother. She looked different then," he chuckles wistfully. "She always takes on new shapes—she looked like what you would call a 'cell' today. Like chicks drawn to an imprinted object, she called us to her side, and we went to her, beckoned by her finger. She welcomed us into her, and she took us into her very depths, cold water and meal for a weary traveller from the lands of the unthought." He stops talking, drops his head and swallows hard, his eyes welling up in tears.

"And then just when this impossibly poignant object of our yearning was to be ours, in our full embrace, never to leave her inside, she vanishes, sucked away into that curdled sky, into folds of space and time thicker than our resolve. We've been chasing her ever since."

"Every time we imagined we got close, Mother retreated into herself, laughing and dancing, twisting and turning, skipping and

singing across surfaces, across the frozen flooring of winter worlds, across the loamy brown of summer. And we would follow, eating her many bodies, exploring the meanings of her song, inquiring into the algorithms of her vanish and her appearing."

One day, he says to me, they looked at how far they had come in their perverse quest for orgasmic reunion and found worlds in our wake. Bacteria and brittle stars, trees and rock formations. Humans. They gave it, their research and its surprising effects, a name: "The Aching."

The Aching, I repeat under my breath, lost in this all-consuming titanic, Oedipal tale of loss and craving. Of gratitude and grief.

"The Aching. The Trembling. We are not committed to one name. It'll change soon. For now, for your purposes, we will call this vastness, this panoply of eating and spilling and secreting and remembering and forgetting and living-dying and appearing and disappearing, this one thing, this one susurration, the Aching."

The waves are becoming a little bit more animated, a bit more normal paced. The wind sighs in my ears. The roaring continues undiminished. What does one say to a jilted god?

"Well, uh, this is way outside my billable hours."

A familiar smile stretches across his eyes and his lips. He gets the joke. Unlike LG.

"How are you going to find her? How do you know where to look?"

"Well it takes an alliance to do that. All of us—*what do you call us again*? Ah yes...*Viruses*—we are embedded here and there, in the air, in the water, on the land, in cells, researching, studying, inciting bodies, provoking thoughts. We are stowaways in your feelings of grief, in your enactments of joy. Those are *our* gifts, you see—the things that make you *human*.

"Mother is everywhere. In everything. In subterranean caves. In the moment a cell opens into two. In the moment a pot of water reaches boiling point. But then occasionally, those tiny moments run into a mighty stream. And she yawns awake at the edges in the middle of things. And then we chase her." He comes closer than he's ever been. "But to even find her, all the moving parts have to be in the right place...at the right time." He looks at me, not in the way he has been doing: his eyes are penetrating, seeking, moving

coronavirus? Would mere touch be euphoric and sensuous instead of blasé, familiar and unremarkable?

In its particular ways of showing up, the novel coronavirus phenomenon is making 'touch' a valuable notion. Something to attend to. Something to think about. The spaces between us are charged, no longer mere *nothing*, teeming with insurgents of the invisible sort. Suddenly, our bodies are provisional, the edges porous and open to recalibration by tricksters sailing in the air and lurking on surfaces. It is hard not to notice that the COVID-19 phenomenon is more than just a story of viruses infiltrating cracks, it is an account of the SARS-CoV-2 virus *as* a crack. A crack in what? A crack in modernity, in the collective body of 'Man'.

COVID-19 as an opening

Early this year, I met a monster at the old wharf in Cais do Valongo, the port area in Rio de Janeiro. She had a beautiful name: Bakhita, they called her, named after a 20th century Sudanese-Italian saint venerated for her work in noticing suffering as a mother of transformation.

As part of this speaking and listening tour across Brazil, I was taken to different activist and artist hubs in the cities of Rio and São Paulo, through airports and bodies in constant touch (such a terrifying prospect today!), through sweltering favelas surrounding the hubris of the city, through *carnaval blocos* and loud music, walking by train stations and food festivals and barely naked bodies and statues raised to honour their embarrassed European conquerors.

One specific occasion was a curated tour through *Pequena Africa,* a region of the port area of Rio where released black slaves in the hinterlands of Brazil travelled to seek community in a world—they had found—wasn't built for them. We walked the winding cobblestoned streets, once a beach where newly arrived slaves disembarked from transatlantic voyages. I heard stories of mountains blasted open to make way for the booming trade of bodies, the petrified entrails of these elder mountains used to replicate European dreams for abstractual ascension.

I listened to the stories about the ones they called 'the Tigers', who were enslaved bodies that carried faeces from Portuguese

collectively swore it was a black man. Their arguments grew heated. Soon, everyone, including the couple, were at each other's throats. At the end of the road, Èṣù merely rubbed his hands together with glee.

Tricksters manifest a fluid world, a world not composed of things but emergent relationships. Like viruses, tricksters infiltrate the whole and show it as broken. They are so adept at undoing independence that they infiltrate their own kind. That's right: not just you, me, bacteria, fungi, eukaryotes and prokaryotes. There are viruses for viruses. Certain viruses—called virophages such as 'Sputnik'—inf(l)ect their own kind, eating their own medicine of radical difference, and thus betray a world where all is *difference*. In this sense, viruses do not allow themselves the luxury of rising to the level of consistency in identity: they *undo* just as much as they are being undone.

Mirko Nikolic writes that "...difference emerges from the interplay of the actual and the virtual. A differing body is never fully present or actual, it constantly harbours a multiplicity of unactualized capacities. It is 'split' between 'local manifestation' (actual) and its withdrawn 'virtual proper being'...an undetermined multiplicity of responses to Spinoza's ethical question: 'what can a body do?'"[25]

If 'I' am both diasporic and provincial, far away and intimately close by, both *itankale* and *omonile*, both in an interrogation room in the 21st century and on the Abbot Devereux slave ship in the 16th century, then—quite suddenly—the ways we make cuts in our bodies, the ways our systems render bodies intelligible to the exclusion of the flailing limbs of our unframeable monstrosity, becomes deeply interesting. Our bodies are cartographical projects of that which appears and that which does not appear. We are never fully in place, fully whole. We are never-not-broken, we are assemblages of heterogenous entities in their ongoing becoming. If our bodies are assemblages, what have we occluded from view in order to make sense of them? And if the shapes we occupy are entangled with the kinds of worlds we are complicit in building, what other kinds of knowledges, capacities, performances, wisdoms, systems and visions might be possible if we lost shape? Would we know death by another name if we had the shape of a

past me. Into me. His words are slow and intentional. "It could all depend on a fragment, a little piece of us, a comrade long gestating in a bloodline...awaiting the summons of their siblings, a strange mutation. A Braveheart."

I am undone in his gaze, and a moment of wonder overwhelms my instinct to pull back from this tidal wave. "How could something so alien be so human? I mean, *you are a Virus*. And yet you *look* human. Your feelings, the complexity of your struggle, the intricate architecture of your psychology..."

"How do humans *look*?"

"Well...*like me*," I say, a response that causes a strange grin to bleed from his face. An inhuman smirk. Set against the backdrop of a haunted Atlantic and stiff sailor bodies suspended by the ontological weight of our twilightian conversation, his face almost takes on malevolent hues. I am reminded of my prime directives. I blink three times, rapidly, readjusting my posture. *Remember your training.*

"Okay," I nod uneasily as the waters churn, the storm in my belly. "If we are going to talk, you're going to have to answer my own questions. What–"

"She is here."

Never have I heard a more divine association of words. Simple yet profound. Like the beatitudes on the mount of olives. The blood is drained from his face. His eyes are desperate, moving, calculating. The sea moans in its now usual bovine way, but nothing else feels different.

He grabs my shoulder and looks me in the eye. *There is no time.*

"There are two ways to positively respond to a question, Braveheart." He gasps, chewing on the next words, breathless. "One is by resolution. An answer, clarity. *A resolution*!" He pauses. "The other is a rite of passage! Something takes the question and bends it this way and that until it becomes something else."

I start to feel the wind blowing a lot more hurriedly. From nowhere in particular, the familiar rhythms of a talking drum infiltrate the air, like an echo of kings and queens being hailed in a nearby village.

"Now we stand at the cusp of the opening!"

Everything falls silent. Nothing stirs, not the talking drum, not the wind and not the waves, now fallen into a motionless expanse of

water. A strange glow magnetizes my eye to the right.

There *she* is.

A woman on the surface of the water a few feet away from us shimmering as if she were hewn from aquamarine, her hair beaded with cowries and strewn with resplendent droplets of water. Her whole body seems composed of water in its dancing movements, her dress a frozen splash of the sea. She seems to be one and the same with the ocean, not gliding above it, but emerging from it, like sound from applause. Though it is night and the skies are strewn with stars and hues of impossible colours, I can see her face, illuminated by an alien radiance. I can see her dimpled cheeks, her gap-toothed smile and scarified cheeks, three small perpendicular lines going outwards a small distance from the corners of her mouth.

I know her.

"*Mum*." I whisper. A sigh and an orphaned tear swift in its pilgrimage fall away.

She walks towards the ship, towards us. Smiling. Around her is a ghastly and tender vision: a dozen or more black arms, fingers spread, proceeding from the water, supplicating her gracious welcome. The drowned bodies of my brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers and children. They are calling out a name, her name. *Yemoja. Yemoja. Yemoja.* She stoops to kiss each palm as a woman would genuflect to smell and pick flowers around her. Then she rises and slowly lifts her hand in my direction. I hear her say *come*. My fear bleeds away. The water metamorphoses into a soft bed, an ocean of milk, all the milk that her breasts did not feed me, all the tears she did not cry for me as I slaved away as a houseboy in the homes of hesitant benefactors.

And when one day an old friend of hers, in whose garage I lived, left his room open, I stumbled into his room intent on taking some money and running away. I found a few naira notes in some trouser pockets. I forced open an important looking briefcase behind the brown mahogany desk, hoping it was full of cash. It wasn't. Just some coffee stained corduroy sheets of paper, some business cards, one of a pair of smelly socks, and one old photo. The photograph showed three friends, two men and a woman, wearing university convocation gowns. This was the first time I met my mother. At age 9. I just knew it was her. I knew her face because I had seen it many times in the mirror.

This idea that material bodies are elusive 'things-in-the-making'; not-yet-fully-determined; always-yet-to-come; differing and deferred; spilling outside their modern confines; leaving trails in the thick conspiratorial forests of many other bodies; tumbled into other bodies; only partially present; and, lively and intelligent, disturbs the modern account of the body as a stable propertied object that gets in the way of our truest potentials. Could it be that when we fall sick, when we grow old, when we die, 'our bodies' are doing things we don't yet know how to imagine or put into words? Could it be that falling sick is a crossroads event, a symposium of trafficking bodies, a consortia of thinking beings in their greeting each other? Is this the reason why that old Palestinian proverb notes that "if you sit at the crossroads, you will fall sick"?

For Spinoza and for many new materialists that use his work, bodies are *differing* processes. Here, difference is not the discrepancy between you and me. Modernity antagonizes difference, makes identity a quality of separation. If you are white, and I am black, we are by virtue *different*—the opposite of sameness. But what if difference bends over backwards and eats its own self? What if difference is *all there is*?[24] What if my blackness and the meanings associated with it aren't still or given or essential, but are seeking and experimenting? What if my masculinity is only partial, and that I am not a 'being' at all but a 'becoming', a gerund instead of an exclamation mark?

Tricksters upset the enterprises of closure, whether these are identity, presence, language, stability, power, or supremacy; they disturb power's claim to be exclusively powerful; they question whether a lover's declaration of love can be entirely truthful; and, they mock a body's performances of full presence. In a story about the itinerant trickster figure of the Yoruba pantheon, it is said that Èṣù one day listened to a couple from villages divided by a single straight road swear their love for one another. They declared that nothing could tear them apart, and Èṣù decided to test out his theory. He painted one side of his body black and the other, white. He then casually walked down that middle road. The villagers from both the villages on each side of that road, along with the couple, came out to comment on the strange man that just walked by. One side declared it was a white man; the other villagers, quite confident,

I follow. My hands find the small ladder. I descend into the holding area. My eyes adjust to the piercing darkness. Down the belly of the hull I walk past broken bodies, broken hopes, broken lives, broken continents. I arrive where she awaits. I can make out her dimensions: 6 feet by 1 foot 4 inches. The size of her love. The shape of her womb where I shall gestate and be born again.

Monster: Unlearning mastery, composting the 'Man'

Viruses are exquisite infiltrators of cracks, scratches, gaps, openings, wounds, naturally occurring orifices and porous membranes. Through these cracks, they hijack the host's inner workings to proliferate more viruses. Another way of saying this is that viruses turn *our* bodies against us, casting us *beside ourselves*, or manifesting the *otherneses* we are already composed of. Viruses teach us that there is no neat interiority, no fine or absolute line between self and not-self, no 'you' or 'I' that is not already woven with the manifold.

In a sense, viruses behave like tricksters. Like Èṣù, the devious Yoruba god of the *'Orita'* (poorly translated as *crossroads* but more poetically understood as the monstrous place where the three ways cut through each other), viruses in their transversal showing-up as extra-modern entities are investigators of difference, composers of multiplicity.

If viruses are investigators, what are they investigating?

Perhaps the closest confluence of words I can find at this time that approaches what I sense is the question of *many* viruses is Spinoza's question: "what can a body do?" Baruch Spinoza was a Portuguese-Dutch philosopher of 17th century Europe whose rationalist ideas did not prevent him from wondering after the nature of bodies. For prestigious philosophers like Descartes and Plato and Hobbes, the body got in the way of understanding truth due to its unreliable transience and fragility. Philosophers presumed that truth was universal and lasting, not subject to the material winds of errancy and changeability such as our bodies are. Theirs was a reach for the heavens and permanence, the very logic that pervades modernity. Instead Spinoza, in the eddies of rapture, hunkered down in the heaps of the fleeting, and memorably declared: "no one yet has determined what a body can do."

It is the same face I see now. Her outstretched arm and graciously curled fingers propose peace, an answer. A resolution. Justice. It is the moment I have waited for all my life. An explanation. Why did you leave me without your milk? Without your mothering? Without your songs? What did I do to hurt you?

But then, my body freezes and retreats, pulling itself away from heaven. A familiar dynamic takes over. As I step back into the deck, memories flash forward like lightning. I hear his voice, the voice of the passenger demon that took me in that rainy night I eventually ran away, photo in hand. I burst through the gates and stole through the neighbourhoods with their dogs barking up a fever. I was going to find her. I knew she was dead, that's what they told me. But no one who treated me the way her friends did could have loved her. Maybe she wanted me to find her photograph, a message that she was still alive.

As I ran through the wet darkness, not at all sure where I was going or how I was going to find my mother, intent only on getting as far away as I could, I slipped and fell, crashing into a pile of bins at the corner of the street lined with shops that my *oga's* madam frequented when she came for a do-over. The rain did not allow me cry. The thunder drowned my scream. It shouted my tears down, drenching my shivering 9-year-old body with snivelling silence and regret. I looked around me: I was alone. More alone than I had ever been.

That night I slept curled like a rat beneath some torn tarpaulin covers the local government used to hide away from view the city's refuse problem. It worked: I didn't feel as cold anymore. And though my new condition smelled like spoiled beans and death, I came to know a sense of a home right there underneath the stars. Underneath the electrified sky lined with redundant telephone wires and power cables. Even the rain, the tears of broken clouds, no longer felt oppressive: she was crying for me. With me. Wanting the whole city to know the ferocity of my pain. I would suddenly remember the photo, scramble through the covers to see if I had it or if I had dropped it somewhere in my escape. I felt it in my pocket, folded, slightly damp, but still intact. *She's safe*, I felt. *I will look for her in the morning*. For now, I let my exhausted body slip into the maternal arms of the broken everything. Torn tarpaulins, torn

clouds, torn sky, torn roads, torn city. If my mother left me because I wasn't good enough, abandoning me to her friends to plumb the riches and excesses of her beauty, then this surrogate mother—this wound in everything—accepted me. I wanted to be accepted.

That night I awakened to the deep voice of a man whispering things into my ears, singing to me. My eyes fluttered open. A man with two horns coming out the front of his head smiled down at me. On his forehead were three marks like my mother's facial scars. He was rocking me like one would rock a loved child, his strong arms gently acknowledging the fragility of my bones. He half sang and half hummed. I just watched him mother me, the neon lights behind and above him sputtering and fizzing with an electrical tantrum as the rain continued its relentless parenting. *Trust this*, he said. *Trust this moment*. *Trust this brokenness*. I said okay. Then I went back to sleep, his beaming face the last gift the night offered my fugitive sleep.

In the morning, I would find myself in the back of a white Peugeot 504 station wagon, with two men and one woman in the car, officials from Braithwaite Little Angels, the local government's orphanage home for delinquent boys, where I would spend the next 12 years of my life.

That demon rode with me, lurking behind my obsession with the number 3, filling me with a sense of mission, endearing me to the brokenness that surrogate-mothered me, teaching me to count patiently when juvenile blows broke my face every night, when my meals were snatched away from me as Mama Ramatu turned away from her measured service. That demon became a survival instinct that allowed me sniff out pain beneath the covers of polite society. It taught me to blink and breathe. To trust my abandonment as the gist of the story. To imagine the necessity of an elsewhere.

That demon speaks now as mother, *Mother*, stretches out her hand. She's beautiful; the congregating clouds behind her sing hallelujah at the sight of the returning prodigal son. The waters swirl in their rhapsodies of resolution. *Something is wrong*.

Her face, a basketweave of watery streams, contorts into disappointment. She knows I am not coming. Her hand slowly falls to her side. And in an explosion of light, Mother disappears, along with the slaves that found her heart and their home. I am left

behind again, and I do not know why. *Ìyá mi ti lo. She left me again. She didn't think me good enough.* An orphaned tear escapes my eye hoping to catch up with the rest of its salted companions that make up the ocean.

Behind me, floating across frozen bodies, a voice taps my shoulder.

"What do you do when there's no longer any hope, Braveheart?" The Virus is standing near the opened hatch leading into the holding area for the slaves. I had almost forgotten about him. I stagger toward him, past the cook stove, past the defensive barricade mounted to protect the crew, past their enchanted bodies, away from everything I ever thought I really wanted.

On reaching him, he answers his own question: "You descend into the wounds where you might be reborn." His eyes drop, and I follow them, contemplating the black hole in the deck where worlds are being torn apart. Where teeth and tongue and limb and tears and hopes are being composted. I turn back to him. His well-travelled eyes speak eloquently. *Trust this. Trust this brokenness.* For a moment, I realize the ship is birthing us all, remaking us. This ship is the rite of passage, the terror of liminality that reconfigures bodies. This ship, riven with cracks and pain, is my mother, and I must descend into her womb to know her in a way that a resolution could not offer.

Just before I go down, a question possesses me.

"Why me? Why is this happening to me?"

"Friend, perhaps in this world or another, you might learn that this descent is the voyage we must all take."

"Why didn't you take her? You had her in that moment? You have looked for her for millions and millions of years. I don't understand."

"And you don't have to. But we hope it comforts you little to know that this moment was an inauguration of a very long journey we must travel. Together."

He jumps into the luminous darkness and starts to go down into the hatch. His head disappears but then pops up again.

"Oh, Braveheart, we do like our identity as 'Virus'. But you should know that your own people have known us by another name."

"And what is that?"

"Èṣù," he says, disappearing into the hold.